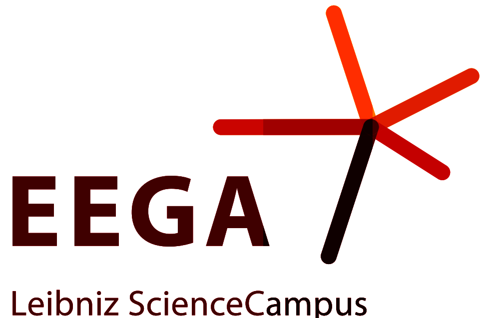

Special Issue No. 2

Conjunctural Geographies of Post-socialist and Postcolonial Conditions

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01 Introduction

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This special issue is part of the ongoing efforts of scholars, artists and activists to challenge knowledge production hierarchies in and about the post-socialist East. It takes the latter as its point of departure *as a site of autonomous theoretical and political practice.* The articles in this special issue focus on a range of topics, including infrastructure and mobility, protest and social contention, feminist and queer activism, property rights and human-soil relationships. All papers reveal and contest the erasure, marginalization and reductionism at play in academic, media and public discourses when it comes to the sociopolitical realities and the histories of the post-socialist East, along with the lived and embodied violence that ensue from the domination of Eurocentric models in post-socialist societies. Each paper offers its own ways of moving beyond political and epistemological dead ends, offering alternative interpretations, methods, ways of theorizing, and academic, activist, and artistic practices, in an effort to contribute towards decolonizing knowledge production and political practice in the region. These contributions offer different strategies through which to navigate and push against our marginalization in knowledge production by engaging with post- and decolonial thinking, unearthing forgotten or marginalized histories, or creating new spaces for knowledge production for post-socialist lives beyond conventional Western paradigms.

Keywords: conjunctural theorizing, decolonial theory, post-socialist East

Introduction: Conjunctural Geographies of Post-socialist and Postcolonial Conditions

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The exclusion of the post-socialist East from the geographies of academic knowledge production has been a long-standing concern for scholarship of/on the former socialist world. This concern articulates itself in a few distinct if interrelated guises. For starters and as they address this disparity of theoretical interest, some scholars have emphasized the dual exclusion of the post-socialist East from comparative research agendas both in the Global North and South. [1] Others have highlighted the minor role that the knowledge produced in the post-socialist East plays in wider conceptual and theoretical debates. [2] While the North is seen here as generative of theoretical knowledge that can travel to the "the rest," East or South, the latter usually retain the function of being an additional case of or an empirical testing ground for Western theories. [3] Still others have demonstrated how the assumption about the relative closeness and similarity of Eastern to Western Europe and its consequent measuring of the former against the latter (for example in the form of comparing socialist and post-socialist cities to capitalist ones [4]) often reproduces racializing stereotypes about the region's alleged institutional or cultural "deficiencies" [5] and its "relative backwardness" vis-à-vis the West [6]. As Mohira Suyarkulova, a feminist scholar from Central Asia, points out in a comment that applies to not only her place of origin: "all too often scholarship [on the region] serves outside audiences, with most of the findings published in a foreign language in obscure academic journals hidden behind a paywall, thus making them virtually inaccessible to the region's citizens." [7]

These longs-standing concerns were re-articulated recently with the unfolding of Russia's brutal war on Ukraine in late February 2022. A number of activists and scholars of/from the post-socialist East vocally resisted the reductionist focus on Russia's aggression. They objected both to "US-" and "West-splaining", and to Russocentric explanations, due to their common dismissal of historically grounded cleavages across the post-socialist East as structurally irrelevant. In addition to debating the analysis of what led to the war, the agency of Ukrainian and other Eastern European societies, and the significance of acknowledging Russian imperialism within a frame of inter-imperiality, Eastern scholars and activists contested the ongoing marginalization of knowledge coming from the East. The Ukrainian scholar Vladimir Artiukh argued in his letter to Western, mostly leftist colleagues that "the world is not exhaustively described as shaped by or reacting upon the actions of the US. It has

gained dynamics of its own, and the US and Europe is in reactive mode in many areas. You explain the distant causes instead of noticing the emergent trends." [8] Instead of claiming to offer a complete or superior analysis, he took seriously the new uncertainties and insisted that the knowledge from the East cannot be dismissed while trying to makes sense of the war: "Overwhelmed with the fog of war and psychological stress, I cannot offer a better perspective. I would only call for help in grasping the situation in theoretical terms while incorporating insights from our corner of the world." [9]

While this "Conjunctural Geographies of Postsocialist and Postcolonial Condition" cluster was conceived long before the outbreak of Russia's war on Ukraine, it started out with a similar intuition about the hierarchies of knowledge production. As a modest expression of solidarity with Artiukh's pressing concern – and fully cognizant of the abyss separating theory and survival – we also insist on taking seriously the post-socialist East *as a site of autonomous theoretical and political practice*. [10] Notably, our emphasis on autonomy here presupposes, rather than precludes, conceptual and methodological interdependence and cross-pollination, understood as a germinative and transformative theoretical practice from location. Such an approach seeks firstly to overcome the tendency to make the post-socialist experience fit under the dominant North Atlantic universals, and on the other hand, to consider that experience as incommensurable with and incomparable to historical experiences from elsewhere. Secondly, it also entails supporting those who work within and about the East by centering local accounts, epistemological and conceptual tools that are useful for making sense of the political and social realities of the post-socialist East. The texts included below join emerging post-socialist decolonial thinkers in helping construct a vocabulary for articulating the post-socialist experience in critical discourses on the global world order. They also seek to move beyond the "West-against-the-rest" narratives in which the post-socialist space does not fit neatly under either one.

Instead of offering a singular formula for elaborating new epistemological and conceptual entries, the nine contributions of this special issue offer diverse and at points experimental approaches to illustrate how the East can be taken seriously in a theoretical and political vein, and also offer different strategies through which to navigate and push against our marginalization in knowledge production. In what follows we first overview how the special issue relates to key debates in post -and decolonial literature on the post-socialist East. Second, we summarize four specific contributions of the articles of the special issue, advancing our knowledge on: [1] conjunctural theorizing, [2] unearthing forgotten histories, [3] decolonial concepts, and [4] subversive artistic and political practices.

Contributing to post- and decolonial literature on the post-socialist East

East European postcolonial scholars of the 1990s famously mined the representational regimes and social imaginaries of Western Europe, as they sought to construct, between the Enlightenment and the 20th century, the East of the European continent as synonymous with the backward, primitive and inherently violent. [11] More recent work on the post-socialist East has taken up the call to probe the co-constitution of global coloniality and modern (racial) capitalism, both extending the emergence of racial regimes further back in time (to the long 16th century and even earlier) and heeding Stuart Hall's argument that, quite often, race is the modality in which class is lived. [12] This special issue of *Connections* builds on this recent tendency, drawing inspiration from the specificities of the post-socialist East over the long durée. This specificity notably necessitates not only a simple repurposing of the central intuitions of postcolonial thought coming from the Global South, but also preparing the ground for genuine contributions by Eastern scholars to the broad conversation around race and capitalism of the present moment. Papers in the special issue have taken up issues of political economy and the deep imbrications of capitalism and racism in the post-socialist context over the past three decades, enriching theoretical discussions of the Orientalizing and colonial forces in the region with a critique of capitalism, privatization, austerity, and racism.

The in-between position of the post-socialist East presents a particular variation on the movement of coloniality. Within more familiar iterations of post- and decolonial theory, an often undifferentiated conception of the West/Global North is posited as the imperializing center, reducing its former colonies and their peoples in the South to a permanently subaltern status. Such homogeneous notions often reduce the East to nonexistence or, at least, relegate it to the rank of a semi-peripheral accomplice to coloniality within the broader confines of the con-

tinent. [13] Yet, as Laura Doyle has recently alerted us, a more productive point of departure for understanding (neo)colonial relationships is that of *interimperiality,* as the set of political and historical "conditions created by the violent histories of plural interacting empires and by interacting persons moving between and against empires." [14] The resulting "inter-imperial loops, or dialectical formations" [15] of what is an inherently *interimperial positionality* implicate Eastern Europe at the intersection of at least three distinct but also inseparable presences: that of the West (including, for some, also the Habsburg Empire until after World War I), the Russian empire (and later the USSR) and the Ottoman empire (with further considerable overtime and cross-regional variations regarding how interimperial dynamics unfolded in specific places). The dynamics of post-socialist societies, cultures and subjectivities unfold through the dialectical interplay of these distinct political, economic, and social formations, complicating single-axis readings of relationships of domination and resistance along the way.

Furthermore, the papers in this cluster are grounded in a positive reassessment of the state-socialist past. A theoretical and not only political casualty of the end of the Cold War, the stigmatization of state socialism has gone hand in hand with the disappearance of the East, as an emergent post-socialist North-South binary came to replace the former "three-worlds" paradigm [16]. Within this optic, it is not rare to see socialist modernity subsumed under the rubric of Western coloniality, as the former socialist regimes are assessed to have been equally complicit in the reproduction of global colonial relationships [17]. Against such erasures, recent scholars have insisted on the more complex – not only complicit but also resisting – role played by the socialist East in the global articulations of racialized power. While socialism never fully disinvested from the trappings of Eurocentrism and civilizational whiteness, its specific logics made room for practices and epistemologies that, at least partially, departed from the colonial underpinnings of the modern Western world. [18] The intermeshing of the logics of implication and divergence reveals the continuous political relevance of the experience of the socialist East, while the potential of stand-alone departures signals positions in a movement towards decoloniality.

A lot of the articles in this special issue, often deploying different methodologies, speak to these ambivalent interimperial dynamics, the manifold ways of reassessing the socialist past and resisting capitalist reality in highly overdetermined contexts. [19] The studies focus on a range of topics, including infrastructure and mobility, protest and social contention, feminist and queer activism, property rights and human-soil relationships. All of the papers reveal and contest the erasure, marginalization, and reductionism at play in academic and public discourses when it comes to the sociopolitical realities and histories of the post-socialist East, along with the lived and embodied violence that ensues from the domination of Eurocentric models in post-socialist societies. Each paper offers its own ways of moving beyond political and epistemological dead ends, offering alternative interpretations, methods, ways of theorizing, and academic, activist, and artistic practices in an effort to contribute towards decolonizing knowledge production and political practice in the region. All texts in the special issue have a broad interdisciplinary range that engages post- and decolonial theory, urban geography, and feminist and queer studies. They also present a unique geographical diversity, speaking from Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria, Bosnia, and Serbia, to Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, in dialogue with postcolonial contexts, such as Brazil and Chile. In this way, the special issue connects post-socialist and postcolonial contexts that do not readily speak to each other. The contributors identify mainly as scholars from/of the post-socialist East and some, as scholars of Latin America. While many of us are diasporic in various ways, we have a personal history and commitment to the spaces we write about. The papers bring the East into focus as a complex, bring the East into focus as a complex, heterogeneous, and at times contradictory regionand, with that, they challenge the erasure of the region even further.

The articles also contribute to post-socialist and post/decolonial literature and existing debates across and beyond disciplinary, thematic, spatial and conceptual boundaries, by making four specific contributions. Firstly, the contributions in the special issue propose conjunctural theorizing of post-socialist and postcolonial conditions as a (decolonizing) method, either through comparisons across *contexts* marked as post-socialist or postcolonial or by revealing an overlapping and simultaneous operation of post-socialist and postcolonial *conditions* in specific geographies. Secondly, the articles reveal how making visible previously forgotten and marginalized pre-socialist and socialist histories can also shed a different light on the unfolding of current modernization pro-

ject and/or imperialist agendas. Thirdly, a number of contributions elaborate new epistemological and conceptual entry points for studying so far under-researched themes in decolonial literature across and beyond the region. Finally, the contributions identify subversive activist and artistic practices that destabilize hegemonic, hierarchical frameworks of political analysis in the post-socialist East.

Conjunctural theorizing as a method

The first set of articles contribute towards decolonizing knowledge production on the post-socialist East through conjunctural thinking between post-socialist and postcolonial contexts and conditions. Mutual engagement between theories and contexts of post-socialism and postcolonialism were encouraged as early as the 1990s [20] and a range of possible venues for such engagement were laid out in the 2000s [21]. Despite these contributions, three decades into post-socialism, scholars have been concerned that "the postcolonial and the postsocialist discourses in their predominant descriptive forms refuse to notice each other's histories" [22], or have warned against "uncritical importation of dehistoricised postcolonial frameworks into a very different context." [23] Yet, engagement with postcolonial literature and, more broadly, between Eastern and Southern contexts has become one of the key sites of resistance against the continuous benchmarking of the East versus the West, and important for elaborating decolonial readings of the post-socialist experience. [24] Articles in this special issue build on existing dialogues and offer a number of noteworthy ways in which post-socialist and postcolonial conjunctural thinking can support critical theorizing.

Kemmer, **Sgibnev**, Weicker, and **Woods**, as well as **Stipic**, draw on two parallel case studies from (post-)socialist and postcolonial contexts to contribute to decolonial theorizing in their respective research fields. They avoid direct comparisons according to the logic of similarity of difference, but instead they use "conjunctural theorizing" as a method. Both contributions appreciate and pay attention to the specificities of each context by mobilizing two parallel cases from Latin America and East Europe to examine how global peripheries or subaltern communities relate to and contest projects of modernity. Kemmer and colleagues conceptualize conjuncture as "the crossing and union of two fields of circumstances" and use it as a methodological grounding for their argumentation. They discuss the introduction, implementation, and contestations of tramway technologies in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Kharkiv, Ukraine. Challenging the uncritical discussions of tramways as vehicles of modernization in transportation research, they make visible colonial asymmetries and the violence that accompanied the development of tramways and infrastructure-based urban renewal projects in (semi-)peripheral contexts. The authors follow a conjunctural approach across not only cases but also different historical periods. They trace the development of tramway infrastructures in cities in Brazil and Ukraine (formerly the Russian empire) at the turn of 20th century and relate those histories to the revival of interest in light rail infrastructures in the 2010s. Drawing on four partially interconnected cases, they shed light on how tram and rail infrastructures transported ideas of European modernity; how top-down imposed urban renewal projects unleashed or deepened socio-spatial inequalities; and, importantly, how such projects were contested through everyday acts of resistance, alternative and subversive narration, and protest and social mobilization. Kemmer and colleagues develop what they call "decolonial conjunctural thinking" to channel the imaginary of these dispersed and localized contestations in the face of solid and large-scale urban modernization agendas, and open the discussion towards "a planetary constellation of subaltern transport thinking."

Stipic's contribution also engages in conjunctural thinking across Eastern Europe and Latin America and focuses on the educational aspects of coloniality in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Chile. The author shows the specific ways in which the two educational projects reiterate social segregation, with private-public and race/class divisions more central in the Chilean case and ethnicity/class tensions more prominent in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, Stipic demonstrates the racialization of ethnicity in the Bosnian context as embedded in the modernist nation-state project of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After establishing grounds for parallel learning from the two cases, Stipic discusses student resistance in the two countries. Student struggles challenge the logic of segregated educational systems and, more broadly, the underlying logic of the ethno-national and racial-neoliberal nation-state constructs in Bosnia and Chile. Emphasizing the decolonizing potential of the two instances of student resistance, Stipic argues that "student performances disarticulate the colonial sum of knowledge precisely because

they reveal the shreds and patches overwritten by the process of coloniality and its occidental nation-state form." Similar to Kemmer and colleagues, Stipic uses conjunctural theorizing as a method to make the political effects of supposedly unrelated subaltern contestations visible.

Lottholz and **Manolova** offer yet another kind of conjunctural thinking in their contribution on the politics of underdevelopment. They argue that historically produced and persisting social exclusion resulting from denied or uneven access to social infrastructure and services should be understood as a "materialization of the postcolonial-post-socialist conjuncture across Eurasia and globally." Lottolz and Manolova focus empirically on peripheralized neighborhoods with ethnic minority concentration in two post-socialist cities – Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and Plovdiv, Bulgaria – and initially show how the racist, ethnophobic and developmentalist narratives are used by municipal and national authorities to justify the systemic under-provisioning of social infrastructures and services for particular locales and populations. In Bishkek, authorities mobilize the narrative of the general peripherality and economic under-development of Kyrgyzstan as an excuse for the selective withholding of infrastructure provisioning for some of the new informal settlements (so-called Novostroikas). In Plovdiv, the authorities utilize racializing discourses of undeservedness against Roma and Turkish/Muslim minorities with the similar purpose of justifying infrastructural exclusion. The authors also discuss the different self-mobilization tactics of minoritized communities in each case. They demonstrate not only the transformative potential but also the limits of institutionalized and more informal, community-based initiatives in the two cities, in the face of systematic infrastructural exclusion. The selective non-provisioning of basic infrastructures is central to a deepening social exclusion and the "materialization of a wider global trajectory of neoliberal urban austerity and under-development." This trajectory, they argue, is shared across post-socialist and postcolonial contexts, as each particular case represents a wider conjuncture that unfolds beyond the post-socialist world.

Unearthing forgotten histories

The contributions by **Smirnova** and **Gambino** bring to life erased histories of sociopolitical life to challenge academic and political constructs of the present and the future. Smirnova provides a historical account of the collective land ownership practices in Russia, revealing how the peasants' collectivist project was instrumentalized by public intellectuals and political elites in support of colonial endeavors of tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Firstly, her contribution critiques simplifications characteristic of (primarily Western) contemporary academic literature, where the history of collective land management in Russia is negated or reduced to the 'tragedy' or the 'fuzziness of property.' Secondly, Smirnova articulates decolonial and liberatory aspects of the history of collectivist land ownership in Russia. Finally, the author also reveals how peasants' practices of commoning were politically mobilized to "denote Russia's otherness from the West and, at the same time, to insert the preeminence of its power practices in the near abroad and amongst its own populations." Smirnova's account then allows us to understand continuities in the attempts of the Russian state to co-opt and appropriate communal values and land ownership practices for imperialist ends. This brings to mind anthropological analyses of Western empires of modernity, which emphasize how capitalism has consistently utilized non-capitalist economic practices and incorporated discourses of sharing, mutuality and reciprocity for legitimating itself as a system [25], and has drawn resources from non-capitalist economies, including the free labor of women and more broadly from the informal economic exchanges for social reproduction [26].

Gambino's contribution details how the futuristic projects of seamless logistical worlds and connectivity infrastructures erase and intentionally manipulate preexisting social, cultural and economic practices, as well as the infrastructural histories of the places they intend to utilize as sites of extraction. Gambino starts off by examining discourses surrounding the Anaklia deep-sea post city project, a gigantic infrastructural project, currently stalled, which was designed to strengthen the embedding of Georgia into the networks of global logistics. She engages with statements by the CEO of the Anaklia City project and the CEO of Anaklia Development Consortium. The former had stated that there was "nothing" in the place where the project was to be implemented, and the latter positioned himself as a patron of the interests and well-being of the local populations. Gambino uncovers the history and continued relevance of Soviet infrastructure networks and Soviet planned and informal subsistence economy practices in the village of Anaklia. She illustrates how the visions of Anaklia's private developers

flatten complex and contradictory local histories and present-day practices of survival and reproduction, and instrumentalize what she calls "restorative nostalgia" to put forward an imagery of seamless logistical futures. Both Gambino and Smirnova's contributions delve into forgotten or simplified histories. On the one hand, they foreground the contradictory and, at times, dark side of these histories, while, on the other, they illustrate how overwriting or flattening such histories, particularly the social memories of self-subsisting economies or collective land management, becomes central to the imperialist projects of capitalist modernity.

Elaborating decolonial theorizing

The next set of articles reveals the so far overlooked topics in existing decolonial literature from and about the post-socialist East, offering empirical and conceptual contributions to decolonial theorizing in the region. [27] **Kušić's** contribution problematizes the absence of land as a topic in the existing decolonial scholarship on the region and offers the concept of "human-soil relationships" as a way of approaching land in the post-socialist East. Given the emphasis in decolonial literature of thinking from location and together with marginalized and invisibilized voices, the importance of making land integral to decolonial theorizing in the region can hardly be overstated. Kušićdraws on her ongoing empirical research in Serbia and Croatia toargue that complexities related to land in socialist and post-socialist times can neither be captured through the post-socialist transitology literature, with its focus on "spectacular" ownership transfer and interest in a top-down process of land governance, nor by way of globally prominent meta-concepts, such as "land grabbing." Kušić suggests a focus on what she calls "slow-politics" and "slow violence" in response to and with the aim of facilitating a decolonial approach to studying land and offers land-soil relationships as an alternative conceptualization of the problem. The latter allows her to move beyond dominant framings, such as agricultural change, and property and economic transformation, and to understand "different knowledges, memories, and ways of being […] living on, with, besides soils in multiple dimensions, temporalities and ways."

Kravtsova's paper explores ideas around decoloniality and dependency among feminist networks in Kyrgystan and Kazakhstan. She draws on interviews with queer and feminist activists, artists and academics in Bishkek and Almaty, and finds that her interlocutors struggled with two sets of constraints. On the one hand, they had to navigate the "colonial" attitudes of Russian activists who took little interest in struggles in Central Asia. On the other hand, and more prominently, they struggled with their own positionality and the association of feminism/queerness/human rights with the West, which posed challenges for decolonizing their own practice and "localizing" their own feminism. Due to the proliferation of women's rights and LGBTIQ* organizations set up after 1991, numerous feminists in Bishkek were involved with these NGOs, leading to their entanglement with "Western" discourses. By contrast, the majority of the Almaty activists were mostly grassroots-organized, while, at the same time, more influenced by Russian feminism. Following decolonial scholar Madina Tlostanova's work around decoloniality and border thinking, Kravtsova argues that the feminist activists exemplified critical border thinking by bringing together the global and the local, creating new solidarities and infrastructures of resistance: "they move between theories, dependencies and practical needs on the ground." The local activists resisted the appropriation of postcolonial theory by the national/ist elites that deepens the control of gendered relationships. At the same time, these activists also resisted the imposed Western narratives of gender equality. In this sense and by being attentive to the local and not dismissive of the "traditional," Almaty's activists developed an intersectional framework through which they expanded ideas around gender and sexuality, as well as coloniality and racism.

Building up subversive activist and artistic practice

The contributions by **Genova** and the **Magic Closet** collective discuss subversive activist and artistic practices, which have grown out of criticism towards the hegemonic frameworks of political analysis in post-socialist societies and carry the potential to destabilize and disrupt normative perspectives. Genova's contribution offers a reading of an 'interruption' from Sofia that mocked the municipal politics of infrastructure governance, and theorizes the potential of humor to serve as a social and political force. The contribution by the Magic Closet, in turn, offers a conceptualization of the 'Dream Machine,' an activist and artistic practice elaborated as a specific methodological contribution to queer knowledge production in the region. The text asserts what the authors refer to (drawing on the work of Edouard Glissant) as the "right to

opacity" of the "magic closet" against the Western logic of transparency of "coming out of the closet."

Genova's contribution starts off with a story of a group of friends staging a "sand dune" in one of the central districts of Sofia in mockery of the municipal government's infrastructure renewal politics in the spring of 2019. Starting from this seemingly bizarre performance, Genova theorizes the political potential of humor to bypass preexisting and solidified frames of criticism of public authorities and the tropes of the post-socialist condition (e.g. corruption), and to disrupt a post-socialist (and possibly postcolonial) temporal logic of belatedness. In doing so, Genova starts by drawing parallels between post-socialist, postcolonial and decolonial literature, each in its own terms articulating how "a logic of historical belatedness," "historical and cultural backwardness" or "temporal alterations" have been at the heart of othering non-Western spaces and societies. She emphasizes how catch-up temporalities cement a racializing matrix that justifies established socio-spatial hierarchies and models of exploitation and extraction. She then moves on to explain how the fictitious "beach party" that ridicules the absurdity of municipal politics of infrastructure governance can serve to disrupt, albeit momentarily, post-socialist transition and modernization narratives in a parodic manner. She argues that the political power of humor and comedy operates "by interrupting a post-communist and colonial temporal logic of lagging behind, by introducing alternative socio-temporal coordinates and frames of reference, that make the hegemonic ones appear at least as arbitrary and silly as their committed iterations."

Finally, the contribution by the Magic Closet leaves us with hope and ambition for creative decolonial storytelling through the Dream Machine as a method of queer knowledge production. The Magic Closet is a collective of artists and researchers from both the global North and the post-Soviet space wholook beyond conventional tools of academic research and envision ways of analyzing and supporting queer lives in the post-Soviet world. They open their article by problematizing international solidarity efforts with post-Soviet communities. On the one hand, these efforts sustain and highlight queer lives in the region but, on the other hand,they also take place within what the authors call the "visibility paradigm," where visibility also means "progress" and prioritizes coming out. The Magic Closet critiques the visibility paradigm as reinforcing Western hegemonic discourses about queerness and, consequently, ignoring "opaque ways of resisting homophobic oppression." In an effort to recognize and support post-Soviet queer lives in ways that do not impose Western epistemic violence on queerness, the authors work a practice of refusal [28] and draw on ÉduardGlissant's concept of opacity. [29] The authors also introduce a methodology which goes well beyond the theoretical, that of the Dream Machine. The Dream Machine is a "kinetic flicker device" which enables the creation of spaces where everyone can dream and later transform these dreams into artistic forms of expression. The archive that later emerges from the Dream Machine becomes a magic closet of post-Soviet queer lives.

Concluding remarks

This special issue grew out of the *Conjunctural Geographies of Postsocialist and Postcolonial Conditions: Thirty Years after 1989* workshop of 2020, and was conceived as part of a cluster of ongoing discussions, among which are the "Dialoguing between the Posts" conferences in Belgrade and the special English-language issue of the journal dVERSIA, "Decolonial Theory and Practice in Southeast Europe" (edited by Katarina Kušić, Philipp Lottholz and Polina Manolova). We are part of a growing community of scholars and activists that takes the political histories of the East as a site of autonomous theoretical production and political practice. All the papers in this special issue, even though they areextremelydiverse in geographical, disciplinary and thematic scope, exemplify a recent growth in scholarship from the East that draws on decolonial insights into making sense of post-socialist contexts. Situated in concrete sites, each contribution develops contextual and comparative analyses which highlight the specificity of the historical and social contexts of the socialist and post-socialist experiences, generating autonomous methods and knowledge about the East. The post-socialist and post/decolonial worlds appear in these methods and knowledge as conjunctural and intertwined. They stand against the erasure of the "East" in terms of geographical positionality and historical experience, and offer new pathways for thinking about 20th century and contemporary history, which take into account the contributions and complexities of socialist modernities and their transcontinental reach.

Aknowledgements: This special issue draws on multiple efforts of the scholars of the post-socialist East to engage with post-colonial and decolonial thinking. Many of the contributors and guest editors of the SI are embedded

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02 Railway Conjunctures: Postcolonial and Postsocialist Trajectories of Urban Renewal

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The global desire for modernity has frequently been expressed through the construction of mass transport systems. As critical contributions to the interdisciplinary fields of urban and transport studies have shown, the unequal provision of infrastructure still reproduces particular geopolitical orders and serves to legitimize narratives of the West's Others as 'backwards' and in need of catching up. Historical trajectories of transport development, therefore, present a case in time for analyzing contested imaginaries and materialities of urban renewal. Against this backdrop, we propose to bring postsocialist and postcolonial perceptions of 'progress' into dialogue by focusing on the asynchronous trajectory of a particular mode of transport technology between South America and Eastern Europe: the tramway. To this end, firstly, we trace how electrified trams were ambivalently perceived as forerunners of 'enlightened futures' when first introduced to Brazilian and Ukrainian cities at the turn of the twentieth century. In a second step, we turn our attention to how their century-long history reverberates in contemporary urban imaginaries and public transport reforms in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Keywords: infrastructure, transport, urban railways, tramways, light rail technology, Brazil, Ukraine, climate urbanism, sustainability, urban renewal, cultural studies, human geography, urban studies

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1. Introduction

International organizations and multinational companies alike have been promoting novel railway solutions to mitigate the negative impact of city growth on worldwide carbon dioxide emissions. [1] These 'modern tramway' or 'light rail' technologies arguably exert a renewed "mythical allure" [2] on urban stakeholders: They promise, within a relatively short time span, to reduce traffic and pollution, change commuters' habits and transform entire city districts into congestion-free and clean air zones. [3] Critical studies in urban and transportation research, however, point to how "low-carbon infrastructural fixes" [4] for climate mitigation have served to reproduce inequalities embedded in capitalist and neocolonial reorganizations of urban space. This diagnosis results in growing calls for decolonizing and disrupting both the knowledge produced on allegedly 'new' transport technologies and to identify anmake visible how the legacy of colonial projects features *in* present-day 'sustainable' urban renewal schemes. [5]

With this in mind, we propose to make a dual intervention: firstly, we want to complement postmillennial critiques of the blackboxing of technological promises in the context of sustainability discourses and climate urbanism by pointing to the *historical dimension* of such transport projects' alleged 'mythical allure.' Here, we contribute a critique of a predominantly positive imaginary of tramways in urban and transportation research by exploring how it has 'traveled' alongside the large-scale violent urban reforms of the turn of the twentieth century from Europe to cities of the 'nonwestern' world. Secondly, we want to approach the (still understudied) relationship between public transport innovation and urban renewal from the particular case of railway technology in postsocialist and postcolonial contexts. We believe that these cases will not only provide new empirical insights into both historical and present-day contestations of a technological 'fix' for socio-environmental problems of contemporary urban societies, but will contribute to decolonizing knowledge about transport by offering a critique that emerges from beyond the traditional centers of railway expertise and production.

Accordingly, we examine two cases of tramway implementation at the turn of the twentieth century and their postmillennial revival in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, and Kharkiv, formerly the Russian Empire and contemporarily Ukraine. In both instances, we argue, public transport was initially envisioned as a means to coercively install a particular modernist vision of the city – a project that was then resisted by popular classes' alternative visions of mobility and urban space. In the new millennium, however, we witness the revival of a hegemonic vision of urban railways understood in terms of sustainability, which then encounter bottom-up resistance. These

contexts demonstrate that public transport is always a site of struggle over who gets to determine the ordering of urban space and in the name of which normative understanding of modernity.

In this way, we translate the conceptual proposition of *conjuncture* – the crossing and union of two fields or circumstances – into a methodological grounding for our argument. A lot of discussion on conjunctures between Latin America and Eastern Europe is centered around the generation, hegemony, circulation and (potential) installation of socialist thinking in these spaces. Recent decolonial border-crossing research, however, has implicitly attempted to displace the hegemonic frame of Soviet history and its global travels, seeking alternative conjunctures between subaltern communities living within the geopolitical spaces dominated by the historical periodization of pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet eras. [6] We follow this decolonial provocation, seeking new conjunctures between Latin American and Eastern European subaltern communities and urban spaces outside the top-down frame of Soviet modernity, hence, the nonobvious decision to leave Soviet history largely undiscussed in this essay. Instead, our contribution emphasizes individual quotes and literary expressions aiming for a bricolage of subaltern narratives beyond one-sided modernity paradigms. We trace the, at times, brutal material presence of urban transport in our empirical case studies, and its reflection in literary sources, historical documents and on snippets cut off from contemporary media debates. With this, we aim at grasping the simultaneity of diverse transport modernities, constantly reclaimed and contested by a variety of people: from transport workers, engineers and politicians to daily commuters.

As such, we argue that transport systems are inscribed in multiple layers and contentious perceptions of modernity. This approach benefits greatly from a coloniality-sensitive research frame. [7] Our emphasis on contested visions of modernity and power inequalities in knowledge production proves crucial for understanding urban mobilities, given how particular forms of mobility are often condemned (such as informal minibuses) and neglected for being markers of a bygone (Soviet/premodern) modernity, or a presumed incapacity to adapt to Western modernity formats. [8] We want to discuss *how* colonial power asymmetries have played out in the installation of public transport systems in Brazil and the Russian Empire, and how knowledge *about* these transport systems can be decolonized and disrupted from our case studies. This article is, therefore, a call toward decolonial transport conjunctures that displace and demystify understandings of public transport ordered around a hegemonic frame of modernity. [9]

2. The construction of the 'foreign' tram: urban transport infrastructure as a contested technology

This section points out how the tram has functioned as vehicle for transporting (colonial) urban imaginaries – and associated urban renewal tactics – from European cities to Brazil and Ukraine already at the turn of the twentieth century. We, thus, add an explicit 'material' perspective to decolonial theory, and particularly literature, on the (re-)import of colonial tactics into urban planning, focusing on not only the circulation of ideas but also actual things.

2.1 Conflicting imaginaries along tramway modernities in Brazil (1850–1950)

Patrícia Galvão narratively paints a tramway scene in the opening of her 1933 avant-garde novel, *Industrial Park,* depicting the collective life of Braz, a working-class neighborhood of São Paulo:

'São Paulo is the greatest industrial center of South America': The textile workers read on the imperialist crown of the 'shrimp' (tram) that rolls by. The Italian girl throws an early morning 'banana' (gives the finger) at the trolley. She defends the country. 'Don't believe it! Braz is the greatest!' [10] This conflict between the imperial bourgeois urban municipal logic of São Paulo versus the working-class localized neighborhood logic of Braz expressed in the struggle over the tram, illustrated in Galvão's novel, is not unexpected. Until World War I, the city of São Paulo was a collection of discrete neighborhoods, such as Braz, and not a unified municipality. [11] In response to this fragmentation, the Paulista middle class pushed to generate a unified urban space during the 1920s and 30s and employed the tram as an infrastructural link that could aid this effort. [12] The opening section of *Industrial Park,* reflecting this urban history, demonstrates how the tram was an urban artifact both used by the emerging bourgeoisie to create a singular coherent unified space, and resisted by working-class neighborhoods insofar as it was perceived as stripping their right to local self-determination.

Indeed, the tram has been a site of conflict since its introduction in Brazil over who has the power to organize city space, and what forms of mobility will be introduced to 'transport' urban imaginaries of progress and modernity. The 'technological fix,' that is, the belief that scientific innovations and new machines would resolve the problems of Brazil's highly unequal urban societies, regularly clashed with poor and working-class residents' contestation of imported technologies and associated imaginaries. The historic foundations on which such conflicts exploded were set by the ruling elite's proclamation of modernization "at all cost," giving way to a complete opening of the national economy to foreign capital from the republican era onwards. [13] This liberalization paradigm in the then-Brazilian capital of Rio de Janeiro was duly followed in the regency of Mayor Francisco Pereira Passos (1902–1906), a railway engineer who had studied with Paris's contested "urban reformer" Baron Haussmann. [14] During Passos' mandate, the city's railway network was significantly expanded and between 1902 and 1905 – the peak of his urban reforms – 40 international companies were authorized to explore new railway lines. Alongside the transformation of Rio's inner-city streets into Paris-style boulevards – where Haussmann had reimported a colonial logic of street enlargement and counter-insurgency into the urban grid from the French colonies in Algeria [15] – the railway companies also retained a special allowance to expropriate and resettle the mainly poor and working-class inhabitants from the city center to urban peripheries. [16] Notably, these companies also adapted the terminology of the 'marvelous' to their publicity for newly-built lines, calling for the new city bourgeoisie of "graceful ladies" and "elegant young men" to enjoy the "*encanto* (charm, beauty, allure)" of the city panorama flying by. [17] As cultural scientist Beatriz Jaguaribe has noted, tramway companies' advertising campaigns produced and reproduced pictures, narratives and symbols of a 'marvelous' Rio as an ambivalent mixture of both "exotic delight" and "hedonist enjoyment" [18], thus, reproducing a signification it had achieved through the colonial conquest of South America, and which was strongly associated with the mythical treasures that Europeans hoped to bring back to their home countries. [19]

Ultimately, instead of bringing the 'technological fix' that urban elites had promised, the introduction of a new technology – namely, the electrification of the first tramways – in the context of large and violent 'urban renewal' schemes pointed out the illusions of Eurocentric notions of progress and modernity. The first decades of electrified tramway service in early twentieth-century Rio were accompanied by numerous protest actions in reaction to fare rises or accidents, commonly referred to as *quebra-quebra* (break-break). [20] When a mandatory vaccination law against smallpox passed congress in 1904, at the height of Passos' violent urban reforms, many of the residents who had already lost their houses to the urban reforms felt additionally threatened by the new law, which authorized sanitary workers to invade their homes and to apply the law by force. A few days after the law passed through congress, mainly poor inhabitants of the central and harbor areas started attacking catenary masts, gas combustors and other parts of the tramway infrastructure, tearing up tracks and knocking over the tramways [21], consequently, transforming the fictional contestation represented in Industrial Park into a daily reality of power struggles in and around tramways of early twentieth-century Brazil.

2.2 Kharkiv tramway policies at the turn of the twentieth century as a fight for self-determination

Tramway technology arrived in the southern peripheries of the Tsarist Empire at about the same time as in Brazil, at the turn of the twentieth century. It came along with continuous disputes of local decision-makers over questions of progress and self-determination. In the case of Kharkiv (located in what is today Eastern Ukraine), intellectual elites and transport planners promoted horse tramways as the only viable answer to rapid urbanization. Comparing the stunning urban development of Kharkiv with Western Europe, Gulak-Artemovsky, a local transport engineer and son of the rector of Kharkiv University, actively promoted tramways among the public: "Kharkiv stands on such level of prosperity and development that it should not lag behind other capitals. I am familiar with the construction of horse-trams, as I have studied their development in Vienna, Geneva, Stockholm and Copenhagen (…). It would be an honor to me to serve my native city by building its first horse-drawn railways." [22]

Following the subsequent decade-long political discussion, the municipality finally opted for two financiers, Bonné and Otlet, in 1882. [23] In the following, the Belgian holding company "Union des Tramways," obtained exclusive rights to both the construction and ser-

vice provision of urban horse-trams for a period of 42 years. Kharkiv was not alone with its decision to entrust foreign companies with the construction and operation of tramway lines. Belgian holding companies developed tramway networks under similarly advantageous conditions all over the Tsarist Empire in the 1880s. [24] Russian engineers developed their own projects and took part in local tenders, but did not succeed with the selection committees. [25]

In 1905, Kharkiv's city *duma* started to build its own electric tramway lines, against the will of the Belgian company. Arguing that the concessionary had not invested in the enlargement of infrastructure despite pressing demands, the government used a loophole to oppose the company's 42 yearlong monopoly. The operator disagreed to any municipal construction project, leaving electric lines to operate in suburban areas without any connection to its two private horse tram lines in the center. In other cases, competition between operators led to acts of resistance and sabotage on construction sites. In October 1905, 300 transport workers [26] staged large-scale protests against the Belgian operator, bringing the urban economy to a weeklong standstill. [27] As a reaction, the city hall considered buying out the Belgian stock company, but the estimated 4,400,000 robles exceeded the municipal budget. Horse trams were shut down in 1919 at the end of the Civil War, thus, ending the unpopular venture of foreign trams as forerunners of a no longer wanted 'European' modernity.

What the Brazilian-Ukrainian railway conjuncture reveals is how tramways have functioned as *vehicles* of modernity, transporting European ideas of progress, as entailed in bourgeois visions of working-class spaces to-be-industrialized, or exoticizing imaginaries of the postcolonial city. Our examples also show, however, that the mythical allure of this particular kind of transport technology and the attempts to couple it with particular visions of the city have not remained uncontested. Alternative visions of urban space and mobility have existed and been acted out through everyday acts of resistance.

3. The 'railway renaissance' and its local counter-histories

3.1. Rio's light rail: A troubled revival of urban imaginaries

In a climate of financial euphoria and "entrepreneurial governance" [28] that captured Rio de Janeiro as part of the preparations for the Summer Olympics in June 2016, the city's mayor inaugurated a new light rail system. He presented it as both "an effort to rescue the city center, a return to the antique Rio, to the era of tramways" and as "a vehicle type that represents the kind of sustainable future we want for our city." [29] Indeed, the Rio Light Rail has been celebrated in various local media outlets as a comeback of the bonde, the Brazilian word for the historical tramway model that had been almost completely abandoned [30] in Rio by the end of the 1960s. [31] And again, this particular type of technology seems closely tied to contested logics of speculation and urban renewal schemes that traveled from Europe to South America.

The 'modern' tramways of Rio were designed by the French company Alstom and are operated by the city's public-private consortium 'Marvelous Port,' which is also responsible for a homonymous massive urban intervention in the central and harbor districts. Similar to urban redevelopment schemes in cities from Buenos Aires, through Boston and Baltimore to Barcelona, the 'Marvelous Port' project follows a global cookbook of regeneration strategies, where the 'local colors' of Rio's central and harbor areas are selectively staged and mixed with a presence of symbols of the latest technology and infrastructure. [32] Those areas of town where once the first tramways had been introduced as harbingers of embellishment and socioeconomic progress 'à la Paris' are again at the center of a major intervention that seeks to adapt Rio's image to present-day standards of the modern, 'sustainable' city. Where the city government of the early twentieth century had authorized early tramway companies to expropriate the poor and working-class residents of the central districts, today's consortium contributes to the eviction of *favelados* (slum-dwellers) from that area [33] by treating land development rights "as just another financial asset." [34]

Ultimately, the Rio Light Rail project presents further evidence of how geopolitical inequalities and dependencies have been reinforced and reproduced through *new* forms of urban investments into 'low-carbon' technological fixes.[35] However, the kind of 'sustainable future' that Rio's mayor envisioned for the Marvelous Port has also been troubled by the dark *histories* of this particular urban area and this specific type of technology that are deeply entwined with colonial differences of race and class and Eurocentric imaginaries of urban progress and modernity.

3.2 Modernization and its reverse effect: the return of the minibus in Kharkiv

Large-scale railway innovation attempts in Kharkiv [36], such as metro extensions and the purchase of new vehicles or the introduction of an e-ticketing system, have been met with major suspicion by a significant part of the population. [37] More than 1,000 people gathered in the city center in 2019 [38], protesting against an announced fare increase. [39] While the local government called this an anti-modernist protest, activists exposed cases of money laundering, fraudulent tenders and nepotism in relation to public transport modernization projects, some of them leading to criminal charges and penalties. [40] Indeed, a broad alliance of protesters, including opposition parties with nostalgic communist attitudes, nationalist right-wing movements and various liberal-progressive citizen initiatives, managed successfully to block fare hikes in a regional court decision. [41] However, the government proceeded and implemented a two-step increase of transport fares, thus, doubling fares within a year. [42] As a result, passenger numbers dropped significantly (25 % fewer tramway passengers; 12 % fewer on buses), leading to a discussion among transport politicians to close down tram lines due to inefficiency. [43]

In parallel with the street protests, European development banks announced their support for modernizing public transport infrastructures. Shortly after, the Chinese manufacturer CRRC Tangshan won a contract for overhauling metro vehicles, at the expense of the Ukrainian PJSC “Kryukovsky”. Heavily contested by local initiatives, the foreign infrastructure contracts reportedly endanger the jobs of approximately 6,000 factory workers in Kremenchuk and the existence of at least five subcontracting companies in Kharkiv. [44]

Such a concentration of capital flows on one large infrastructure project increases center/periphery divides through a gradual process of thinning out municipal transport offers in suburban regions. [45] Moreover, it counteracts the attempts of local tram and bus depots to renovate their fleets. As a direct consequence of these policies, several tram and bus lines were closed in 2018/2019. As a result, ironically, the diesel-fueled minibus fleets that have been contested by local transport politicians as ruthless competitors of the municipal transport service have come to mitigate municipal network cuts. [46] Kharkiv citizens awaiting the implementation of ‘modern’ Chinese technology solutions for an extended metro network in their city are left with rather unsustainable services reliant on informal and precarious working conditions that had long been presented as a system ‘to be overcome’ by public authorities.

Demystifying one-sided imaginations of technological fixes or frictionless urban renewal through simple transport infrastructure replacement/‘modernization’ is, thus, more than an intellectual exercise but should include both marginalized voices and material objects in their analysis. In this sense, the protests of Kharkiv citizens and transport workers alike may illustrate how top-down modernization interventions rather trouble Eurocentric notions related to the “imbrication of the formal and the informal” [47] and, thus, invite us to further expand our understanding of infrastructure promises [48] and their multilinear and ambivalent aftermaths.

4. Conclusion

While the first tramway systems of the late twentieth century have already been introduced as part of violent spatial restructuring alongside center-periphery logics, the colonial legacy of this relationship gains a new dimension in the context of a proclaimed international ‘railway renaissance.’ This is spearheaded by a new type of urban railway technology, once again exported by European and North American companies, which promises to catapult cities into ‘sustainable’ modernity. Such a ‘mystification’ of the modern tramway has reached the point where the installation of new low-carbon infrastructures and urban revitalization now seem to be inevitably connected. [49] This imaginary of urban transport systems is deeply entangled with “expectations of the modern, circulatory city,” where a huge flow of passengers and vehicles is supposed to be orchestrated in an orderly manner and offer a transport option which “inculcates a culture of discipline, order, routine and cleanliness.” [50]

Our cases illustrate a complex tapestry of superficial success stories of urban renewal and modernization as well as localized contestations of those transport systems. [51] Modernization dispositives – today embodied in hegemonic infrastructural visions – arrive in local contexts under certain preconditions, determining perceptions and political narratives. [52] Therefore, a consequent decolonial deconstruction of the purpose and impact of prominent modernity articulations remains not only valuable but necessary for a substantial critique of urban development governance. Such a decolonial conjuncture re-

quires that researchers look for potential material connections among subaltern public transport systems and thinking across the world – the *quebra-quebra* protests in turn-of-the-century Rio de Janeiro, the Italian girl cursing the tram in 1920s São Paulo, the Kharkiv transport workers challenging the foreign public transport operator in 1905, and so on – that displace dominant visions of public transport still organized around a logic of acquiring modernity. In this way, *decolonial conjuncture thinking* allows us to move beyond the binary logic of neocolonial globalized modernity versus limited localized contestations toward a *planetary* [53] *constellation* of subaltern transport thinking that has been silenced under the spatially extensive dominant paradigms of modern public transport. This article's dialogue between South America and Eastern Europe is a first step towards such a decolonial conjunctural rethinking of public transport.

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[23] Д. И. Багалей & Д. П. Миллер: История города Харькова за 250 летего существования (1655–1905): Истор. монография в 2 т.: Т. 2.– Репринт. изд.– Х., 1993.– 982 с.

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[35] Galdo, Sem Receber Da Prefeitura; cf. also Manuel B. Aalbers/Raquel Rolnik/Marieke Krijnen, The Financialization of Housing in Capitalism's Peripheries, in: Housing Policy Debate 30 (2020) 4, pp. 481–485; Patrick Bigger/Nate Millington, Getting Soaked? Climate Crisis, Adaptation Finance, and Racialized Austerity, in: Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space, 3 (2019) 3, pp. 601–623.

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03 Decolonial Pedagogy of Dissent: The Life of the Occidental Nation-State among Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Chilean Secondary Students

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This article builds upon strings of thought that advance comparative thinking between postcolonial and post-socialist spaces [1], and includes communication stories of subaltern high school struggles from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chile. I ask what does the experience of protesting students tell us about the ways in which Bosnia and Chile remain entangled within the occidental nation-state project by bringing dissenting student narratives and their challenge to the hegemonic orders, as they developed in Srednja Strukovna Škola Jajce (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and Liceo de Aplicación (Chile), to the center of discussion. I understand the educational project as central for the enforcement of power/knowledge relationships that weave permissible forms of nation-state being and subjectivity, and posit student protests as a practice of decoloniality projected upon the coloniality of the modern nation-state and demonstrate how student narrative rearticulates the sum of knowledge we have of these social formations. The study is methodologically based on several ethnographic visits to Bosnia and Chile and the high schools in question, and on personal communication I have maintained with protesting students. The article contributes to the literature on decolonial theory by demonstrating the conflictual relationship that the colonial nation-state project maintains with societies on global peripheries that fail to meet its prescribed ideal.

Decolonial Pedagogy of Dissent: The Life of the Occidental Nation-State among Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Chilean Secondary Students

Igor Stipic, Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg

It was a cloudy and rainy day in January 2017, one of many that characterize the long and sunless winters of central Bosnia, when I entered the cozy coffee shop in the center of town to meet Luka. I arrived in Jajce a few days ago to meet a particular group of young people who initiated the first protest against school segregation in post-socialist Bosnia-Herzegovina. Due to the personal history I have as a former student of a divided high school in the city of Mostar, the student opposition towards the 'two schools under one roof' – a type of educational project that segregates students on the basis of ethnicity [2] – immediately drew my attention and awakened feelings that go way beyond mere academic interest.

While we spoke about his future hopes and life plans, Luka told me: "I would prefer to study here in Bosnia, I mean in Sarajevo. That is, I do not want to go abroad because I wish to do something for *naši ljudi* (b/h/s. 'our people')." Once the phrase *naši ljudi* entered the conversation, Luka suddenly paused and, thinking for a moment about what he just said, clarified this: "When I say *naši,* I do not mean Croats [his and my ethnic group]. When I say *naši* I mean all Bosnians and Herzegovinians, the people of this country."

Luka's statement, even if virtually removed from the arena of parliamentary representation and hegemonic understanding of Bosnia-Herzegovina, was important because it successfully reinforced the ambiguous dialectics of 'us' and 'them' that, even in spite of the terrible results of the 1990s war, keep informing the perplexities of home and belonging in post-socialist Bosnia-Herzegovina. Playing with the concept that, within a contemporary ethno-national context, came to predominantly refer to ones' ethnic group, Luka repurposed the term in order to express the feeling of belonging which was not captured within the dominant discourse.

My thinking about the events that emerged in Srednja Strukovna Škola Jajce (Jajce Technical High School) during the October of 2019 initiated an exchange with another educational movement, one developing on the other side of the world, in Chile. The two rebellions were similar in a way that both fought against the segregationist model of education which reflected the predominantly sociopolitical organization. In a sense, both models related to the inability of these countries to forge unified societies. While the main obstacle towards reaching unity in Bosnia was the category of ethnicity/religion, in Chile it was that of class/race.

Domingo, a high school student who would only later become my informant, and a group of pupils from Liceo de Aplicación (Application High School) started mass evacuations in the metropolis of Santiago in a struggle against segregationist educational principles reigning throughout education in their country, an intervention that sparked the biggest wave of social mobilization in

post-colonial and post-dictatorial Chile. This student protest, perhaps portraying an intriguing relationship that exists between education and state organization, resulted in the convocation of the plebiscite for the redaction of the new constitution, one that will become the first democratic social contract this society would establish in more than 200 years since its official date of independence.

The student antagonism towards the pedagogical projects that stand at the heart of the ethno-national state in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the racial-neoliberal one in Chile portrays ambiguities that circulate around the aura of these modern nation-states. Consequently, outbursts of dissent in Srednja Strukovna Škola Jajce and Liceo de Aplicación become immensely important because students, rather than proposing a mere educational reform, demanded a complete refoundation of their respective societies. On the one hand, feeling unease while being forced to wear the mad man's shirt imposed upon Bosnia-Herzegovina by the coloniality of a nation-state that was officially consecrated by the constitution signed in a U.S. military base in 1995 [3], Jajce students offered a vision of community relaxed from the voices of nation-state politics in its replacement. On the other hand, speaking from the position of a public high school attended by pupils of a lower social class that live lives diametrically opposite to those of the wealthy, marginalized actors of *Darío Salas* rejected the segregationist principles of Chilean education and demanded a complete refoundation of the nation-state perplexed with colonial historicity.

The present article with its focus of stories of subaltern student struggle explores the relationship between education and nation-state organization in the post-socialist and postcolonial spaces of Bosnia and Chile. Taking dissenting student narratives and their challenge to the hegemonic orders as the center of discussion, I ask: 1) What does the experience of protesting students tell us about the ways in which Bosnia and Chile remain entangled within the occidental nation-state project? 2) How does the student narrative rearticulate the sum of knowledge we have of these social formations? In this sense, understanding an educational project as central for the enforcement of power/knowledge relationships that weave permissible forms of nation-state being and subjectivity, I posit student protests as a practice of decoloniality projected upon the coloniality of a modern nation-state. The study is methodologically based on several ethnographic visits to Bosnia and Chile, to the high schools in question, and on personal communication I have maintained with the students engaged in the protests. The article contributes to the literature on decolonial theory by demonstrating how colonial pedagogy remains deeply embedded within the nation-state project, and portraying the conflictual relationship this project maintains with societies on global peripheries that fail to meet its prescribed ideal.

Coloniality of the modern nation-state in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chile

I think about Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chile together by accentuating their entanglements within the historical formation of the modern nation-state as a hegemonic form of sociopolitical organization that expanded globally as a result of colonialism. I follow the modernity/coloniality perspective, in a sense that I recognize how the end of formal colonialism did not bring about the disappearance of coloniality as a knowledge structuring mechanism. In a notch, being "constitutive of modernity" [4], coloniality is a product of colonialism in which we all reside. That is, the conceptual unity of modernity-coloniality [5] affirms that the colonial epistemic project informs the "overall design or optics determining relations between the world, the things, and the humans" [6] even in the historical epoch of postcolonialism.

In this sense, the occidental nation-state form – unitarist, homogenous and racist/xenophobic in nature – presents a remnant of the colonial project that is central for the perpetuation of the coloniality of power in the contemporary world. [7] The nation-state form, geopolitically and geohistorically located in Western Europe, remains overdetermined by its specific ways of knowledge, subjectivity and being. [8] Thus, the nation-state form embodies a "supposedly universal framework of thought" that "perpetuates, in a real and not merely a metaphorical sense, a colonial domination." [9] Here, non-*Western* European colonial countries, *like [Bosnia-Herzegovina] and Chile,* have no historical alternative but to try to approximate the given attributes of this specific modern form of political community even when the very process of approximation means their continued subjection under a world order which only sets their tasks for them and over which they have no control. [10]

Keeping in mind that the process mentioned above has impacted on Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chile in different ways, I argue that the Bosnian case shares important characteristics with the more obvious examples of

colonial geographies. While the territory of Chile was colonized in the 16th century by the arriving Spaniard conquistadores and 'liberated' in the early 19th century, the contemporary space of Bosnia-Herzegovina remained under the occupation of the Ottoman Sultanate and Austro-Hungarian Empire from the 15th until the early 20th century. In fact, even in the aftermath of the Austrian departure, Bosnia remained subjugated under South-Slavic kingdoms until the end of the WWII when it finally had its specific subjectivity both *de jure* and *de facto* recognized within the context of socialist Yugoslavia.

Moreover, considering historical developments through the lenses of coloniality (not colonialism), we can understand that the process of national liberation from the Spanish Empire in the 19th century hardly brought real freedom to the subjugated peoples of Chilean lands. Under the control of the dominant classes, the new Chilean state implement the project of "internal colonialism" [11], where, under the policies of *blanqueamiento* (Spanish 'whitening'), it repressed the indigenous population and expelled its traits from the national imaginary. At the same time, the state encouraged European immigration in order to make a 'whiter' nation. [12] In this sense, Chile can be positioned within the general condition of Latin America, where the construction of modern nation-states implied a process that was strictly directed against the reality of the social world that remained dominated with Indian and/or Mestizo majorities. As such, it presented a scenario of an impossible nation-state, a social space where it historically remained impossible to construct a fully nationalized society or a genuine nation state. [13]

Furthermore, Quijano's idea that "the coloniality of power established o the idea of race should be accepted as a basic factor in the national question and the nation-state" [14] is similarly applicable to the Bosnian case. In a similar fashion to that of Chile, historically embedded cultural heterogeneity has made Bosnia into an unlikely nation-state, a member of the club that remains overdetermined by the occidental ideal of homogeneity and racial superiority most obvious in the predominance of ethnocentrism at the very foundation of the national idea. Thus, indigenous and lower-class mestizos remained only peripherally included in the national project dominated by the ideal of white superiority in Chile, while in Bosnia, the racialization of ethnicity/religion disabled people who share a common language, history and descent to construct a unified political community.

Therefore, while such reality is usually well accepted in the case of Chile and openly ignored in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian example, I claim that the historical progression of internal colonialism, implying the application of foreign models to local conditions, persistently resulted in the failure of the modernist dream in both of these societies. In this sense, coloniality, understood as a knowledge structuring mechanism, profoundly impacted on each of these social formations in distinct yet comparable ways. The coloniality of power is visible in both cases because in each of them, it was the imposition of the idea of race, particularly through its intimate relationship with class, ethnicity and religion, that emerged as an instrument of domination and acted as a limiting factor for constructing a nation-state based on Eurocentric model.

In this sense, both Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chile are constructed around the colonial axis of hierarchization and unable to embrace its proper sociocultural and sociohistorical specificities, and, therefore, remain in a situation of colonial condition. [15] This specific reality of a modernist quagmire inside of which both of these social formations have found themselves throughout the long modernist epoch is well depicted by the notion of failed labor in the work of Chilean novelist and poet Roberto Bolaño. [16] In other words, neither Bosnia nor Chile were able to construct themselves as a genuine nation-state while attempting to reproduce a western model of a sociopolitical organization. The historical process reconfigured racial into class hierarchies in Chile and produced social inequalities that disable real democratization of both society and the state. However, in Bosnia, it was the historic inability of society to replicate the modular western nation-state that resulted in the depiction of a country that is simultaneously seen as a failed state and not a nation-state at all.

Pedagogic state: educating consent in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chile

Educational theorist Michael W. Apple notes that "the national curriculum may be modified by the conflicts that its content generates, but it is in its very establishment that its politics lies." [17] With this in mind, I consider that, rather than being one and universal, education and its specific national narration are "always entangled with projects of regulation, assimilation, transformation, *and* conservation." [18] Thus, education, while promoting a specific form of nation-state knowledge and subjectivity,

holds power over national cartography due to its ability to write a specific national space and its story. In this sense, the Gramscian "educator state" [19] is central for the perpetuation of specific power/knowledge relationships as it remains endowed with a superior capacity to imprint epistemic violence upon the wider population.

With this in mind, I argue that segregated educational systems are integral for the perpetuation of coloniality within the contemporary states of Bosnia and Chile. The type of colonial domination elaborated in the earlier parts of the article, understood as coloniality of power, remains deeply embedded within the educational models of each society. Thus, the Bosnia-Herzegovina educational system, replicating the wider organization of the social world, remains, just like the ethno-national state that gave it birth, segregated along the lines of ethnicity. In a similar way, Chilean contemporary education represents a bedrock of the historically embedded racial order of the Chilean nation-state and an expression of the more recent military intervention that prevented a change in such order. [20]

Moreover, Bosnian ethno-national and Chilean racial-neoliberal states and their education which were once positioned within the colonial condition and explored through their entanglements within the occidental nation-state form come to communicate in interesting ways. The observation that both pedagogic projects educate social segregation as normatively accepted reveals the subtle pedagogic aspect of the coloniality of power. The Bosnian educational system divides children according to ethnicity and separates young Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs from each other, while the Chilean one also divides pupils into three categories, attributing, in general lines, to each race/class its type of school: private-paid (white/high or upper middle class), private-subsidized (mestizo/middle class) and public (mestizo, indigenous/lower class).

With this in mind, the story of Bosnian races, being an intriguing case, requires special attention. Even though racialization of ethnicity and religion in Bosnia is something I was somewhat aware of throughout my life, it was openly exemplified to me as such for the first time in 2014 through the case of Josip, a student of Croat ethnicity studying in the divided high school in the city of Mostar. Josip used the category of race (and not that of ethnicity or religion) to emphasize the differences between the Croat and Bosniak population in the city when speaking on the educational TV show about school and social segregation in our town. While explaining why he never visited the famous Old Bridge (located in the Bosniak/Muslim part of the city), Josip stated how he was afraid to cross sides because people on the Bosniak/Muslim part would be able to recognize that he is Croat by simply looking at his skin color. Josip's belief that Mostar Croats/Catholics are whiter than their Bosniak/Muslim counterparts reflects how the coloniality of power remains embedded within the racial character of the nation-state. Conversely, the perceived racial difference is important because it is sufficient to explain the inability of constructing a common political community on the territory of not only Bosnia-Herzegovina but Chile as well.

Thinking about various Bosniak friends who for one reason or another appear 'whiter' than Josip, I wanted to check if this racialized perception of Bosnian ethnicities is widespread. Therefore, I asked class participants during the 2020 online high school summer course I taught in Bosnia-Herzegovina whether they thought racial differences between Bosniaks and Croats indeed existed. To my surprise, almost all of these students, regardless of their ethnicity, responded in the same way as Josip did. Only one Bosniak student, with a skin tone and hair color that somewhat approximated a northern European ideal, probably looking at herself in the ZOOM camera image, stood quietly in bewilderment and, after rolling her eyes for a while, finally asked: "And what about me?" While these classroom 'incidents' generally demonstrate the prevalence of the racial character of the Bosnian ethnic order, the last scene in which a presence of a Bosniak student with the lightest skin tone in class is openly ignored confirms the ideological character of racism, one that remains strictly related to the modernist nation-state project.

Having these experiences in mind, I suggest reconsidering Bosnian ethnicities through a colonial lens and asking how Bosnian ethno-religious groups come to be rather racialized social categories. I argue that, Bosnia-Herzegovina, positioned within the frame of European regimes of whiteness, imports the racist logic from the west which it superimposes onto its existing religious frame. While Bosnian Christianity (Croat/Serb) easily qualifies as more white than Bosnian Islam (Bosniak), Bosnian Catholicism (Croat) takes primacy with respect to Bosnian Orthodox Christianity (Serb). In this sense, the Bosnian educational system, reflecting wider principles of the sociopolitical organization of the ethno-national state, indeed

represents an example of nesting orientalism [21] since it constantly produces racism without races [22] by reproducing the legacy and predetermined form of European modernity within the local context of epigonal Europe. [23]

Decolonial pedagogy of dissent

According to Mignolo, "decolonial thinking and doing focus on the enunciation, engaging in epistemic disobedience and delinking from the colonial matrix in order to open up decolonial options – a vision of life and society that requires decolonial subjects, decolonial knowledges and decolonial institutions." [24] In this paper, remaining sensitive towards "the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge growing out of the local histories, subjectivities and experiences" of Southeastern Europe and South America, I shift the attention and "revisit how the local histories of different geopolitical spaces" function "within the colonial matrix of power." [25] I follow Dussels' philosophy of liberation [26] and consider the location of the speakers, in this case of protesting students, of Luka and Domingo, as the new locus of enunciation from which to reconsider the nation-state and its narration. Student experiences of the nation-state serve here as a point of departure for the knowledge production that can simultaneously embrace the constitutive "underside of modernity and use it to construct the possibility of other worlds." [27]

Moreover, understanding the educational project as central for the enforcement of power/knowledge relationships that weave permissible forms of nation-state being and subjectivity, I posit student protests as a practice of decoloniality projected upon the coloniality of the modern nation-state. Here, student voices, advancing a cultural, epistemic and subjective difference, articulate a subaltern critique of the hegemonic nation-state model, a critique that extends an invitation towards alternative ways of knowing the political community. Conversely, oppositional student politics turns into a practice of epistemic delinking from the ethno-national and racist-neoliberal states in Bosnia and Chile, respectively.

The following two student manifestos demonstrate the way in which protesting students are positioned vis-à-vis the hegemonic nation-state and its central narrative. "Ethnically segregated education will only deepen social divisions, and will cause the nationalism in Jajce to rise, a fact that will only benefit nationalistic parties. We, the students of Jajce, demand a complete cancelation of the system known as 'two schools under one roof' and advocate the implementation of a unified curriculum. Finally, we require support from all citizens of Jajce and Bosnia and Herzegovina to join our struggle against those who live in the past and do not let us build the future that we desire." [28]

"Education has turned into an illusion of a different and better life, and today it is nothing more but frustration, an unfulfilled promise of something better, a mechanism that materially and ideologically reproduces injustice and domination. […] We do not only mobilize for ourselves, but for a country as a whole, for the majorities, for a project of a more democratic, participative, and just society. […] We are the tip of the iceberg, of a continent that no longer tolerates being abused, stupefied, beaten, humiliated and exploited. […] We are inheritors of past battles; we are memory and historic accumulation. […] Our mobilizations have uncovered an unjust, unequal and unfair country." [29]

Bearing the aforementioned in mind, I claim that the voices of protesting students have the power to produce an interrupted address and offer supplementary writing that can antagonize the structures of the modern/colonial state by revealing the difference between the enunciation (the context of utterance) and the address (the context of listening). [30] In other words, the official statement of the nation-state, emitted from political institutions and embedded in educational systems, is suspended by the time it reaches Srednja Strukovna Škola Jajce and Liceo de Aplicación. Once contrasted with the student experience of the social world and its order, official narration is interrupted on the periphery of the nation-state precisely because its explanatory power in this territory is effectively diminished.

Thus, these particular histories of student antagonism towards the state and its education, while incompatible with the story found in official textbooks, portray ambivalence existing within the idea of the nation-state, an idea whose indetermined character reflects the conflictual relationships existing between those who write (books approved by the ministry of education) and those who live its narration (the subaltern students). In line with this, Aida, a 17-years-old student from Srednja Strukovna Škola Jajce, while talking about the proposed idea that her classmates of Croat ethnicity should study their own history, notes that: "History, since we inhabit the same territory, is shared by us all. Since history is science, it cannot

be national, and even when it is called national, then this refers to the history of a certain state. Since we live in the same state, if history is a science, then it cannot be different for children who belong to Croat and for children that belong to Bosniak people. If this history is different, then this means that it is not a science but a servant of a particular regime."

The unease towards official history, which is seen as an imposition, was similarly expressed to me by Domingo when I asked for his view about Chile: "Sometimes I think Chile is a sad story of massacre and exploitation. I think we are a country that has not had the opportunity to progress in accordance with its interests. I believe we have been denied this quite a bit. I feel that Chile is a very, very violent construct, that it is one construct that has never allowed all its cultural expressions to develop peacefully within it. Sometimes I think Chile is a country built by force, by violence that comes to the surface every time something happens that is not to their liking. Therefore, there is no goal in Chile to build our country together. Instead, there has always been an attempt to overcome one point of view, one sense of things, one vision of our history. I think we are historically witnessing the consolidation of a country that is not ours, a country that does not fit our way of being, our culture."

Therefore, bearing in mind the location from which the high school protests and its narrative emerges, I argue that student resistance towards instituted knowledge, such as the one witnessed in the student practice of mourning, reveals the colonial wound [32] of nation-state making in Bosnia and Chile. A careful reading of the student histories and their antagonism reveals anxieties withheld within the dominant narration of the nation-state in both societies. [33] The unhomely position of unincorporated subjects reveals the uncertainties of home and belonging to ethno-national and racial-neoliberal states in Bosnia and Chile, respectively. Thus, when we hear Luka contesting the fact that he is officially not allowed to be Bosnian because this is not a constitutional category, we realize that it is not the truth proclaimed by the state but the knowledge which emerges from everyday experiences that subaltern students have of such a state, and that have for their difference been silenced, made inexistent and irrelevant, that become the only ones capable of "provincializing Europe" and "returning the gaze" [34] to the hegemonic occidental nation-state from the localized standpoints.

In conclusion, both student social movements, propagating the inclusion of demands emerging 'from below,' allow us to reconsider the position of historically 'subalternized' political actors, located on the margins of the colonial nation-state projects – i.e. far away from Dom Naroda or La Moneda (the seats of power in Sarajevo and Santiago, respectively) – within the process of national narration. It is here, at the point of their interface, where the tension between the pedagogic and the ethnographic life of the nation-states is revealed. Echoing the problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of social authority and which is located around the aura of the nation-state, the antagonistic student performances disarticulate the colonial sum of knowledge precisely because they reveal the shreds and patches overwritten by the process of coloniality and its occidental nation-state form. In this sense, the inability of colonial pedagogy to domesticate protesting students demonstrates how the established nation-state, haunted by the spectrum of class, race, ethnicity, class antagonism or trans-ethnic solidarity, remains far from being an undisputed project. Thus, students from Srednja Strukovna Škola Jajce and Liceo de Aplicación create an environment by opening up the spaces for misrepresentation and misappropriations of the official narration, inside of which students can finally begin "learning to unlearn" [35] or, as Domingo puts it, "dream with society where people do not compete over who has a better last name."

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Notes:

[1] Sharad Chari/Katherine Verdery, Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War, in: Comparative Studies in Society and History 51 (2009), pp. 6–34.

[2] There are three predominant ethnic groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim), Serb (Bosnian Orthodox) and Croat (Bosnian Catholic). Young people are forced to attend separate educational programs in the parts of the country where two or more ethnic groups live together. When these young people live so close to each other, they are placed within the same building but kept divided in different classes, floors or even segregated by having different entrances to the same high school.

[3] The Bosnian and Herzegovinian contemporary constitution, also known as Dayton Peace Agreement, was signed by three warring factions under the supervision of the United States in the military base situated in Dayton, Ohio. The document, written only in English, creates an ethno-national social order inside of which people of distinct ethnic origin are not allowed to form part of and feel that they belong to the same political community.

[4] Walter Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options, Durham 2011, p. 3.

[5] Anibal Quijano, Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America, in: Nepantla: Views from South 1 (2000), pp. 533–580.

[6] Madina Tlostanova, The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option and the Post-socialist intervention, in: Monika Albrecht (ed.), Postcolonialism Cross-examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Newcolonial Present, New York 2019, p. 166.

[7] Quijano, Coloniality of Power.

[8] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept, in: Cultural Studies 21 (2007), pp. 240–270.

[9] Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?, Tokyo 1985, p. 11.

[10] Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought, p. 10.

[11] Pablo Gonzales Casanova, Exploracao, colonialism e luta pela democracia na America Latina, Rio de Janeiro 2002.

[12] Jorge Larrain, Identidad Chilena, Santiago 2001.

[13] Quijano, Coloniality of Power, pp. 567–568.

[14] Quijano, Coloniality of Power, pp.

[15] Tlostanova, The Postcolonial Condition.

[16] Roberto Bolaňo, Amuleto, Barcelona 1999.

[17] Michael Apple, Cultural Politics and Education, New York 1996, p. 35.

[18] Madina Tlostanova/Walter Mignolo, Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas, Columbus 2012, p. 22.

[19] Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, in: Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.), London 1971.

[20] In 1973, the coordinated action between the Chilean elites, the Chilean army, and the United States finished the experiment of the Chilean path to socialism led by the government of Salvador Allende Gosens.

[21] Milica Bakic-Hayden, Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia, in: Slavic Review 54 (1995), pp. 917–931.

[22] Etienne Balibar, La Construction du Racisme, in: Actuel Marx 2 (2005), pp. 11–28.

[23] Manuela Boatcă, The Quasi-Europes: World Regions in Light of the Imperial Difference, in Thomas Reifer (ed.), Global Crises and the Challenges of the 21st Century: Antisystemic Movements and the Transformation of the World-System, Boulder 2012, ch. 10.

[24] Walter Mignolo, The Darker Side, p. 10.

[25] Tlostanova/Mignolo, Learning to Unlearn, p. 6.

[26] Enrique Dussel, Beyond Eurocentrism: The World-system and the Limits of Modernity, in: Fredric Jameson/Masao Miyoshi (eds.), The Cultures of Globalization, Durham 1998.

[27] Marcelle Maese-Cohen, Introduction: Toward Planetary Decolonial Feminism, in: Qui Parle 18 (2010), pp. 3–27.

[28] Jajce Student Council, Mladi jajački srednjoškolci traže podršku javnosti, March 21, 2017, https://www.tacno.net/rijec-mladih/jajacki-srednjoskolci-traze-podrsku-javnosti-ne-dopustimo-etnicku-podjelu-skole/ (accessed November 10, 2017).

[29] Asamblea Coordinadora de Estudiantes Secundarios (ACES). Propuesta para la educación que queremos, December 1, 2019, http://www.opech.cl/comunicaciones/2011/12/propuesta_aces_definitiva.pdf (accessed May 8, 2020).

[30] Homi Bhabha, Nation and Narration, London 1990.

[31] Walter Mignolo, The Darker Side.

[32] Bhabha, Nation and Narration.

[33] Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference, Princeton 2000.

[34] Tlostanova / Mignolo, Learning to Unlearn.

04 The Politics of Urban Underdevelopment in Kyrgyzstan and Bulgaria: Community-level Self-organization in the Absence of Infrastructures and Services

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This paper analyses the manifestations of the postsocialist/postcolonial conjuncture in urban spaces across the former Soviet periphery. It unpacks patterns of the underdevelopment and neglect of marginal communities alongside their attempts to compensate or challenge this status quo and authorities' failure to address it. Building on document and fieldwork data analysis from a study in the minority-dominated district of Stolipinovo, Plovdiv (Bulgaria), and 'new settlements' *(novostroiki)* in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, the text maps out the failure and absence of infrastructures and services in three specific areas and examines contestations around this situation. Thus, while Kyrgyzstani authorities invoke the state's insufficient budget and lack of capacities to explain the dire situation, the Plovdiv authorities invoke ethnic minorities' 'encapsulated' existence and responsibility for decay and disorder within a cultural and racialized frame, pointing to the deeper logics of urban underdevelopment that place these postsocialist spaces within the wider colonial matrix of power.

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Introduction

This contribution looks at the former Soviet periphery to inquire how the postsocialist-postcolonial conjuncture is unfolding in the realm of infrastructures and social services. As part of a larger study on infrastructures and social mobilization [1], our research unpacks patterns of the underdevelopment and neglect of socially marginal communities and the latter's attempts to compensate or challenge these state and municipal policy failures. We, thus, seek to examine these infrastructurally under- or non-developed communities as sites where regimes of capital accumulation and depreciation, the reshuffling of public-private ownership structures and the developmentalist aspirations of regional or global hegemonic actors produce distinct manifestations of the postsocialist-postcolonial conjuncture. Seen from this vantage point, forms of urban under- and de-development in the specific postsocialist Eurasian contexts can be conceived of as materialization of a wider global trajectory of neoliberal urban austerity and underdevelopment.

The contribution focuses empirically on ethnic minority-dominated districts in Plovdiv, Bulgaria (Stolipinovo, in particular), and so-called new settlements (Ru. *novostroiki)* in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Although situated at different ends of the postsocialist periphery, these contexts present strikingly similar constellations of formerly state Socialist countries under Soviet rule or geopolitical influence which have been subjected to large-scale neoliberal reform and restructuring since 1989. [2] Against this background, we draw on an existing body of public policy analysis and 58 interviews with community members, policy-makers and other stakeholders to map out the absence and failure of infrastructure and show how inhabitants of affected communities have tried to address these issues through formal or informal self-organization that either tackled the problems directly or raised them with the responsible authorities. We further analyze how municipal and wider state authorities explain or justify the non-provision of more adequate services and infrastructures. The discursive registers these actors invoke can be traced back to longer-standing historical discourses on the peripheral and economically disadvantaged position of countries in the Eurasian periphery (particularly in Kyrgyzstan), and to ethno-nationalist civilizational framings about Roma and Turkish-origin minorities being 'encapsulated' and unworthy of infrastructural development and service provision (as in the Bulgarian case). In this sense, present forms of urban underdevelopment are embedded in historical formations of exclusion and inequality, which presents a particular materialization of the postcolonial-postsocialist conjuncture across Eurasia and globally.

Urban under- and de-development: A site of postsocialist/postcolonial conjuncture

Both in the postsocialist and postcolonial contexts and globally, urban spaces arguably present a "laboratory" [3] or perhaps the epicenter where the changes brought by neoliberal restructuring and earlier transformation efforts have played out and continue doing so. As Stanilov points out [4], with more than 300 million people living in cities across postsocialist Eurasia alone, urban spaces present a primary site for the study of social differentiation and change. Although processes of economic and territorial restructuring in rural areas should not be downplayed, the role of cities in (re-)shaping societal relations via their role as market platforms is obvious. Existing literature on processes of population concentration, dispossession and restructuring of both built environment and social relations in postsocialist spaces has considered different historical epochs in places ranging from Southeast Europe [5] to Central Asia [6] and across postsocialist Eurasia [7] Put briefly, this literature largely agrees that the overall trajectory of postsocialist urban development has seen "a transfer of assets, resources, and opportunities from the public to the private realm" which "resulted in an increase of individual choices and standards of habitation paralleled by an overall decline in communal living standards," including infrastructures, services and public goods more generally. [8] In particular, the redistribution, division and development of urban space and built environment according to commercial interests without effective regulation has led to most attention being focused on and investment being made into "city centers, the prestigious neighborhoods, and […] the suburban periphery where rampant commercial and residential construction has obliterated the landscape […]," while "[m]any of the remaining urban areas that have been less appealing for developers have been left to age not very gracefully." [9]

In light of the dynamic but also highly unequal developments in postsocialist cities, Stanilov exhibits the similarities of postsocialist cities with the wider picture of global urbanism, including "the urban vitality of the Western European inner city neighborhoods; the degree of privatization of urban resources typical of North American cities (not to mention the fascination with the lifestyle culture of malls, suburban houses, and private automobiles)," and, pointing to the conjuncture with postcolonial contexts, "an eroded level of public service provision characteristic of Third World countries; and the booming economy of the East Asian cities from the 1970s and 1980s." [10] Such comparative considerations offer important entry points for conceptualizing the selective and uneven infrastructure and services in urban spaces across the postsocialist and postcolonial worlds. While comparisons across these signifiers are provided in other parts of this collection [11], we will proceed by focusing on the postsocialist/postcolonial conjuncture observable in two locales across the post-Soviet periphery. Such a perspective appears all the more important in light of the relative lack of attention paid to postsocialist urban dynamics amid the dominance of global South and North perspectives in urban studies. [12]

As scholarship on East European urban spaces has increasingly pointed out [13], the collapse of markets and distribution networks as well as neoliberal downsizing have produced increasingly deepened exclusion and differentiation via the selective non-/provision of infrastructures and services. The problems created by the resulting failure and absence of infrastructure has been discussed more generally in several strands of postcolonial and critical social research literature. Anand et al., for instance, pointed out how "infrastructures around the world […] offer archaeologies of differential provisioning" [14] where breakdowns and absence are more the rule than the exception. They indicate the societal significance of such infrastructures, which work as a "sociomaterial terrain for the reproduction of racism" [15] and differentiation and exclusion along other lines, which Ruth Wilson Gilmore conceived of as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." [16] On this basis, Anand et al. develop what could be called a necropolitical vision of infrastructures as "technologies that modern states use not only to demonstrate development, progress, and modernity […] but also to differentiate populations and subject some to premature death." [17] In succinct terms, "To govern infrastructure […] is to govern the politics of life, with all its inequalities." [18]

However, infrastructures and their social life remain ambiguous as they are instantaneously associated with "experiences and sentiments of hope, inclusion, violence, and abandonment." [19] Infrastructures and services can, thus, be seen as "critical locations through which sociality, governance and politics, accumulation and dispossession, and institutions and aspirations are formed, reformed, and performed." [20] As Chelcea and Pulay [21] have shown, political claims or concrete actions

in relation to infrastructures can relate to forms of citizenship, such as the "incomplete citizenship" of those cut off from utility networks, and "maintenance and repair citizenship," implying ideas of ensuring the operability, improvement and extension of infrastructures. Such attempts to (re-)establish minimal functioning and provision as part of wider global trends of urban "infrastructural activism" [22] and countermoves of the justification and normalization of non-provision in various discursive registers throw important light on the postsocialist/postcolonial conjuncture as it unfolds in these urban sites.

Mapping urban underdevelopment and self-organization in Bishkek and Plovdiv

Bishkek and Plovdiv, while far apart at first sight, present strikingly similar constellations of formerly Socialist cities under Soviet rule or geopolitical influence which have been subjected to large-scale neoliberal reform and restructuring since 1989/1991. Both places have undergone relatively dynamic development since then, as international trade (especially in Bishkek) and foreign investment into manufacturing and outsourcing industries (in Plovdiv) has turned them into economic centers with a sizeable in-migration of urban populations. An urban real estate boom driven by rising investments and commercial sector expansion materialized in ever more and bigger shopping malls and upper-scale housing estate projects have been among various disadvantages affecting these new developments. With housing becoming increasingly unaffordable, the establishment and expansion of 'new settlements' or *novostroikas,* i.e. shanty towns or slums, around Bishkek have concentrated a large population of about 250,000 formerly rural urban poor at the margins of the city (about a quarter of the city's overall population). Meanwhile, the spatial concentration of Roma and Turkish-origin minorities in residential quarters in Plovdiv, particularly in the district of Stolipinovo with officially 45,000 inhabitants, is the result of the withdrawal of a large part of the 'ethnically Bulgarian' population that had inhabited the districts since the 60s and 70s as part of socialist anti-segregation housing policies.

The communities in these two contexts face relatively similar issues which constitute scenes of failure and a lack of urban infrastructure and services. In Bishkek's new settlements, under- and nondevelopment manifests in the need of fully legalized neighborhoods to fight to be connected to utility and road networks for a lot of years, while still unacknowledged *novostroiki* remain largely disconnected. [23] Newly built dwellings in minority-dominated neighborhoods in Plovdiv are equally affected by the authorities' refusal to extend utility networks, but an even bigger issue is the decay and disrepair of municipal and recently privatized housing and infrastructure, which pose everyday obstacles and health risks to the population. The study, conducted by Lottholz and supported by Manolova in the Plovdiv context, builds on the analysis of project and policy documentation, public discourse and over 80 formal interviews and informal conversations, as well as participatory observations and the attendance of relevant community-level and policy-related events from 2019 to 2021. The emerging themes have been presented to and discussed with community representatives to add a nuance and background to the results. This piece focuses on mapping out of these scenes of infrastructural failure and disconnection alongside residents and external actors' attempts at compensation and the reestablishment of infrastructures and services. It looks at the three interrelated areas of i) basic infrastructures and services, ii) social services, health care and education, and iii) public order and crime prevention, before unpacking various stakeholders' justification of the current situation.

i) Basic infrastructure and services are largely nonexistent in Bishkek's 'new settlements,' most of which are literally built on 'green fields' and have undertaken long-standing negotiations with municipality and service providers regarding the extension of utility networks, roads and attendant services. The analysis followed a capacity-building project by the United Nations Population Fund [24], aimed to help communities raise key issues with authorities while prioritizing small-scale interventions that promise achievable progress. Thus, the creation or renewal of infrastructure was limited to small flagship initiatives, such as building or refurbishing playgrounds, sports pitches, street lighting or the gravel surfacing of roads. Other than that, the project communities still face a very limited and unequal access to basic urban infrastructure.

The key issues in the Stolipinovo district in Plovdiv are the functioning and maintenance of roads and utility networks, which the municipality ensures only partially, while reportedly denying requests for extensions to new properties. A core problem is the negligence and decay of communal spaces and infrastructure in multistory blocks, which homeowner associations are unable to mend be-

cause of the lack of financial resources, while the municipality is criticized for not ensuring maintenance in the remaining public property buildings. House administrators (Bulgarian: *domupravitel)* are often left to their own devices when dealing with emergencies in cases of flooding or pipe leakages. Garbage collection is a contentious issue as residents claim it to be insufficient, while the authorities claim that Roma and Turkish-origin minority dwellers intentionally pile up garbage next to containers. The authorities' failure to tackle the situation has been sharply criticized by a newly founded resident network "Residents of Stolipinovo" *(Zhiteli na Stolipinovo)*, which pointed out the insufficient number of waste containers and collections.

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Illustration 1: Bishkek new settlement Ak-Tilek (source: author's photograph, Philipp Lottholz)

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Illustration 2: Opening of a "communal space for communication" in Ene-Say [25]

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Illustrations 3: Stolipinovo district: Illegal rubbish dump (source: author's photograph, Philipp Lottholz)

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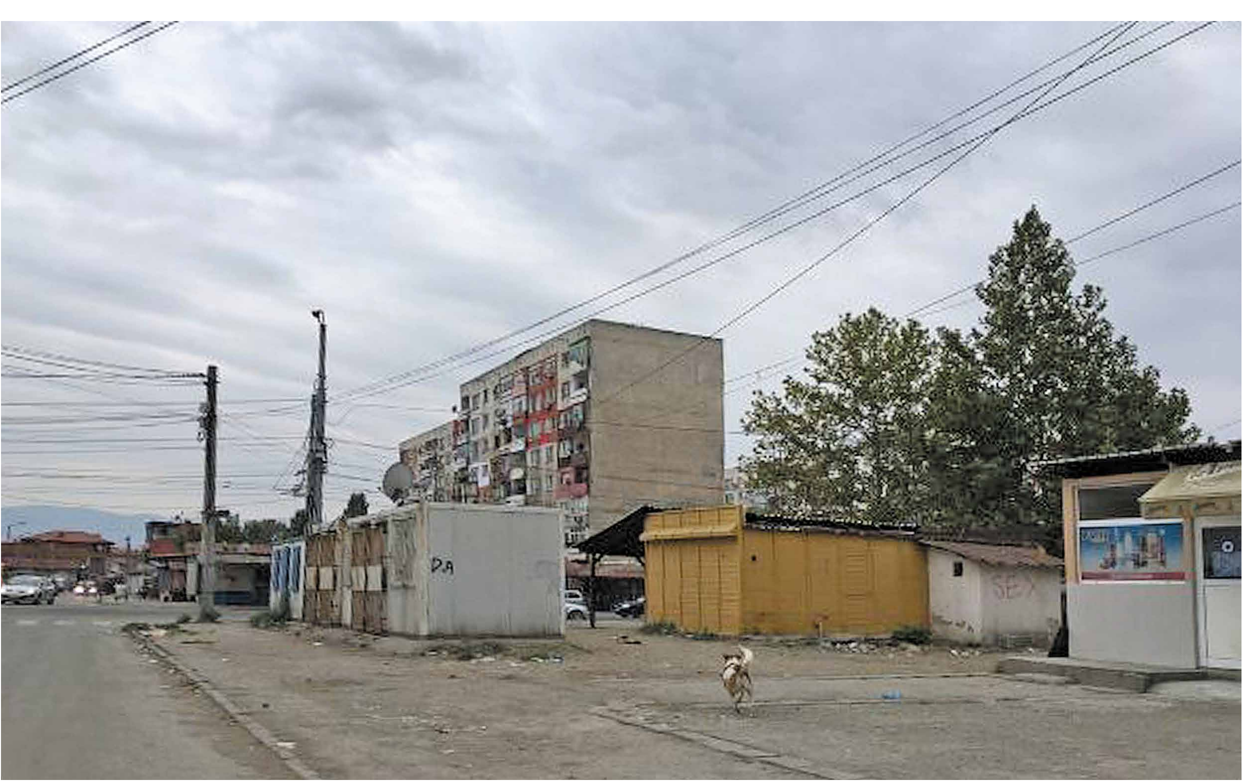
Illustrations 4: Stolipinovo district: Bins after collection(source: author's photograph, Philipp Lottholz)



↑
Illustrations 5: Stolipinovo district: Buildings in front of apartment blocks (source: author's photograph, Philipp Lottholz)

ii) Social services, health care and education: In both contexts, many residents are refused access to welfare and health care, given that they do not have residential registrations and no health insurance plans. Limited legal knowledge and (in the Bulgarian case) language barriers complicate this. School education in Stolipinovo is facing quality issues, while it is completely lacking in Bishkek's 'new settlements,' where the few existing schools have to accommodate up to five times more pupils than their capacity can manage and must, thus, work in multiple shifts; kindergartens and nurseries only exist in the urban center and are largely inaccessible or unaffordable.

The United Nations Population Fund project in Bishkek supplied some of the equipment lacking to health care structures alongside training in legal service obligations, mobilized 'Public health committees' to carry out preventive measures (e.g. measuring blood pressure), provided legal assistance for accessing health care and supported existing initiatives fighting for the creation of further schooling capacities. A municipality-run program in Plovdiv supported and extended a network of 'health mediators' and 'education mediators,' who help residents access services and improve communication and legal knowledge. This and other programs tried to foster minority youths' 'integration' into a wider society through language training and cultural activities, which were said to be lacking and have led to an 'encapsulated' existence. Various community-based centers and organizations aim at strengthening youth education and care for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but their reliance on European Union funding casts doubt on their long-term effectiveness.

iii) Public order and crime prevention: High rates of unemployment, poverty and sociocultural heterogeneity confound issues of petty crime, occasional larger conflicts along group/ethnic lines, and issues of domestic and gender-based violence in both contexts. Only formal institutions and structures deal with crime and deviance in Plovdiv, including the police, municipal-level public security bodies and various 'Centers for Social Rehabilitation and Integration' run by municipal and nongovernmental organization partnerships to prevent deviance among the disadvantaged or 'at-risk' (Bg.: *riskovi*) social groups. The present work, mostly carried out in nongovernmental organizations and foundations, focuses on the creation and capacitation of shelters and 'centers for victims' as well as support from the Centers for Social Rehabilitation and Integration for the children and youth affected. Petty and youth crime is almost exclusively dealt with by the police and municipal security services, with a few preventative measures carried out by nongovernmental organizations in schools. The local authorities, while absent in many regards, take a heavy-handed approach in regularly demolishing illegal buildings, such as garages and dwelling houses, which causes widespread indignation among community residents.

A number of community-level bodies work together with law enforcement in Bishkek to prevent and deal with domestic and low-level disputes/crimes. These include newly created initiative groups and formalized bodies, such as courts of elders or *aksakals,* alternative dispute resolution bodies operating according to Kyrgyz 'customary law,' 'women councils' or 'Committees for the Prevention of Violence in Families.' Current interventions aim at strengthening existing bodies' work and creating new ones to deal more effectively with domestic and gender-based violence.

Politics of (and against) urban underdevelopment in the postsocialist-postcolonial conjuncture

The different forms of infrastructural and service deficits/failures and forms of self-organization to compensate for them point to important trends and implications for our theoretical discussion. Starting with the preconditions and their invocation in popular and powerholders' narratives of underdevelopment justification and normalization; there is a striking difference in the generalized legitimization of the underdevelopment of new settlements across the two contexts. Narratives on the country's peripheralization and socioeconomic disempowerment predominate in Bishkek, while in Plovdiv, infrastructural failures and the exclusion of some groups of urban development policies are justified with racializing discourses on otherness and undeservedness. In the case of Bishkek, one major factor (and partial justification narrative) of the infrastructural and service exclusion of new settlements is the national level of underdevelopment and economic dependency, which are conditioning a structural deficit and, hence, the inevitable exclusion of otherwise vital items from the state budget. This raises questions about the price of lobbying provisions to new settlements, as opinions on the competition between new settlements and 'Bishkek proper' indicate. [26] The

fact that some new settlements are well-connected and serviced shows that this is possible and largely dependent on negotiations with private sector service and infrastructure companies. Where infrastructure and services are not profitable, international organizations seem to be a preferred partner as they are ready to finance at least the most necessary – although often symbolic – provisions, a nexus which could be viewed through Rutazibwa's conceptualization of development as reparation for underdevelopment in the global periphery wrought by the west. [27] In contrast to that, the racism and cultural othering of minorities when explaining or justifying the disconnect of services and infrastructure in the Stolipinovo district of Plovdiv seemed deeply entrenched. Interviewees regarding all three subject areas portrayed the minority communities as 'encapsulated' (Bg. *kapsulirani*) and unable to integrate with the wider society, whether in linguistic terms, practices of waste disposal or adherence to legal procedures. The exclusion of these communities, thus, appears to be systemic, with little prospect of a way out, and, in light of few or no effective challenges, requires the nurturing of a new approach towards cultivating alternative thinking.

With regard to the second focal aspect of this contribution, that is, the various forms of self-organization and wider frameworks which are embedded in our research, we have identified a largely 'corporatized' model in Bulgaria under the obvious influence of the conditions that European Union and other international partners pose for funding support. This model involves nongovernmental organizations, various social and educational centers, and more socially grounded actors, such as 'health' or 'education mediators' that are operating on a fully official and salaried basis. It has the clear benefit that people working in these structures can devote more time and more easily be held accountable for their actions. On the other hand, the resident initiative 'Residents of Stolipinovo' was successful in mobilizing donations of food and basic necessities for people who had lost their livelihood during the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative benefited from transnational solidarity and support from residents with higher incomes due to their labor migration to Western Europe. Yet, the dependence on labor migration of most of Stolipinovo's population, who reside in the neighborhood for only limited periods of time, makes attempts to organize community life and maintain infrastructure more challenging. These issues are further complicated by tensions along socioeconomic lines – with better-off community members taking things 'into their own hands' and poorer ones unable to contribute equally – and between Roma and Turkish-origin groups that often exchange accusations and mutual stereotypes.

By contrast, there is a web of municipal, self-organized and more informal institutions and actors working on both community and neighborhood levels in Bishkek to compensate for the lack of and insufficient infrastructures and services. Such organizational networks can be defined as 'socialized' or 'societal' models, which benefit from voluntary work and spontaneous initiatives. As the analysis found, national-level nongovernmental organizations carrying out capacity-building and activation projects were successful in appointing new voluntary community leaders, initiative groups, committees and community centers as their partners, or reactivated already existing ones. That said, the wide range of infrastructure and service issues was only selectively mirrored in and addressed by these initiatives. Initiatives and groups working on less commonsense topics, such as domestic and gender-based violence, faced disagreement and even backlash when they tried to address cases, for example, of early marriage and domestic abuse. Furthermore, negotiation with local government and international organizations turned contentious when expectations beyond low-effort flagship projects (such as installing closed-circuit television or refurbishing sports pitches and children's playgrounds) were addressed. Verbal altercations and tensions between the two sides pointed to the wider problem with the structural deficit of the municipality and state resources that, according to state representatives, precluded the fully fledged inclusion of new settlements' infrastructural and service terms. Insights beyond the primary analytical focus revealed that efforts to improve living conditions on Bishkek's urban margins have been long-standing and well-connected. The community-based nongovernmental organization Arysh, for instance, has been working with 'self-help groups' and initiative groups since 1997 and its exchange visits to and dialogue with community organizations in Bangalore, New Delhi and Agra in India since the year 2000 are a good example of the possibility of 'transversal' exchange and cooperation in trying to organize social and political movements. [28]

The picture of urban marginality and underdevelopment in Bishkek and Plovdiv presents, as we argue, a key site of the postsocialist-postcolonial conjuncture, where the coloniality of power produces palpable and lasting effects. Our contribution illustrates the "infrastructural activism" [29] and particularly forms of 'repair citizenship' that residents enact while helping to (re-)establish infrastructures and services, but also exhibits how their "incomplete" [30] and abandoned status is being upheld by authorities' uncooperative or even hostile stances. The othering and racializing logics underlying these positions present a contrast to the less explicitly racist urban regimes of the global South and North, and, thus, affirm the importance of looking at the postsocialist world in its own right. [31] Furthermore, the insights into the transnational dimension of both the problem and the struggles and resistance against it point to the potential of linking and scaling up such movements. Perhaps more than these linkages, the parallels among *novostroiki* settlements within Central Asia bear even further potential for joint organization and exchange, while pan-European networks of Roma organizations present an important potential of drawing together ideas and resources for people in Stolipinovo and other Roma and Turkish-origin-dominated districts. While these potentials remain to be further explored, the contribution offered in this text is a perspective on how self-organization and mobilization emerge out of the conditions of a 'bare' and suppressed life in underdeveloped and systemically excluded urban communities as a key site of operation of the colonial matrix of power.

Notes:

[1] Philipp Lottholz, Social Mobilisation in the Absence of Infrastructures and Services in Urban Margins: Toward "Societal Infrastructures", in Voices on Central Asia (November 15, 2021), online version is available at https://voicesoncentralasia.org/social-mobilization-in-the-absence-of-infrastructure-and-services-on-the-urban-margins-toward-societal-infrastructures/.

[2] Kiril Stanilov, Taking Stock of Post-Socialist Urban Development: A Recapitulation, in: Kiril Stanilov (ed.), The Post-Socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism. Dordrecht: Springer, 2007, pp. 3–17; Emil Nasritdinov/Bermet Zhumakadyr kyzy/Diana Asanalieva, Myths and Realities of Bishkek's Novostroikas, in: Marlene Laruelle/John Engvall (eds.), Kyrgyzstan beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State": Social and Political Changes in a Post-Soviet Society. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 143–163.

[3] Tsypylma Darieva/Wolfgang Kaschuba, Sights and Signs of Postsocialist Urbanism in Eurasia: An Introduction, in: Tsypylma Darieva/Wolfgang Kaschuba (eds.), Urban Spaces after Socialism. Ethnographies of Public Places in Eurasian Cities. Münster: Campus Verlag, 2011, here p. 9.

[4] Stanilov, Taking Stock, pp. 3–4.

[5] Miloš Jovanović, Bourgeois Worlds and Urban Nightmares: The Post-Ottoman Balkan City through the Lens of Milutin Uskoković's Newcomers, in: Journal of Urban Cultural Studies 5 (2018), pp. 187–206.

[6] For instance, Nick Megoran, Shared Space, Divided Space: Narrating Ethnic Histories of Osh, in: Environment and Planning A 45 (2013), pp. 892–907.

[7] For instance, Stanilov, Taking Stock; Darieva/Kaschuba, Sights and Signs; and Tauri Tuvikene/Wladimir Sgibnev/Carola Neugebauer, Introduction: Linking Post-Socialist and Urban Infrastructures, in: Tauri Tuvikene et al. (eds.), Post-Socialist Urban Infrastructures. London: Routledge, 2019.

[8] Stanilov, Taking Stock, p. 11; Tuvikene et al., Introduction, pp. 9 ff.

[9] Stanilov, Taking Stock, p. 10.

[10] Stanilov, Taking Stock, p. 12.

[11] See Kemmer et al. and Stipic in this collection.

[12] Tuvikene et al., Introduction, p. 3.

[13] For instance, Liviu Chelcea/Gergő Pulay, Networked Infrastructures and the 'Local': Flows and Connectivity in a Postsocialist City, in: City 19 (2015), pp. 344–355.

[14] Nikhil Anand/Akhil Gupta/Hannah Appel, Introduction: Temporality, Politics, and the Promise of Infrastructure, in: Nikhil Anand et al. (eds.), The Promise of Infrastructure. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, here p. 3.

[15] Anand et al., Introduction, p. 2.

[16] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007, here p. 28; cited in Anand et al., Introduction.

[17] Anand et al., Introduction, p. 4; Gilmore, Golden Gulag.

[18] Anand et al., Introduction, p. 21.

[19] Anand et al., Introduction, p. 11; Tuvikene et al., Introduction, p. 7.

[20] Anand et al., Introduction, p. 3;

[21] Chelcea/Pulay, Networked Infrastructures.

[22] Manissa M. Maharawal, Infrastructural Activism: Google Bus Blockades, Affective Politics, and Environmental Gentrification in San Francisco, in: Antipode (2021).

[23] Nasritdinov et al., Myths and Realities, p. 155.

[24] United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) Evaluation of GPI Project "Addressing Social Disparity and Gender Inequality to Prevent Conflicts in New Settlements in Bishkek", UNFPA Kyrgyzstan (2020), online version is available at https://mptf.undp.org/project/00108093 [scroll to "Project final reports"].

[25] Facebook Page of UNFPA Kyrgyzstan, (June 25, 2019) online version is available at https://www.facebook.com/unfpa.kg/posts/2340580056009347?_tn_=-R

[26] Nasritdinov et al., Myths and Realities, p. 147.

[27] Olivia U. Rutazibwa, On Babies and Bathwater. Decolonizing International Development Studies, in: Sara De Jong/Rosalba Ocaza/Olivia U. Rutazibwa (eds.), Decolonization and Feminisms in Global Teaching and Learning. London: Routledge, 2019, Ch. 15.

[28] Interview & informal conversation with representative of "Arysh," Bishkek, September 11, 2019 and September 2, 2021.

[29] Maharawal, Infrastructural Activism.

[30] Chelcea/Pulay, Networked Infrastructures.

[31] Tuvikene et al., Introduction.

05 From the commune to the ‘borderless world’: Russian conceptions of land and ownership

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This contribution engages with the episodes in the history of the Russian ‘property debate’ to showcase its decolonial temperaments and their contested outcomes. Russia has offered a wide-ranging and disputed decolonial optic built in opposition to the Eurocentric idea of private property, which was then swiftly mobilized against Russia’s own citizens and neighbors. Among many, the ideas of ‘commoning,’ ingrained in the everyday life of the peasant land commune, were utilized by the Russian philosophical movements as an antithesis to the liberal property based on legitimate ownership and a bundle of rights. This decolonial project was then, in turn, mobilized to attach people to the land, limit their mobilization and produce compliant subjects of the late imperial and later socialist regimes. Moreover, some took this imaginary to argue for the expansion of a pan-Slavic nation-state based on the unity of *narod* (the people) and their collective ownership of all-Slavic soil beyond Russia’s national borders. With these points in mind, this essay seeks to stimulate a discussion about the conceptual roots of Russia’s complicated relationship with both the private property of its own citizens and the territorial sovereignty of its neighbors.

From the commune to the 'borderless world': Russian conceptions of land and ownership

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Introduction: Russia in the 'property debate'

Russia's long and disputed history of private property has attracted the attention of numerous scholars beyond the confines of the post-Soviet world. While the familiar idea of property based on Eurocentric experiences frames exclusionary and individual claims to land, Russia offers a different model. The study of the Russian property relationships was undertaken through different thematic lenses of agrarian reforms, post-socialist transitions, large-scale land grabbing and informality in rural development, with 'critical agrarian studies' as a primary contribution of Russian intellectual tradition on land rights to the global scholarship. Revolutionary events of the twentieth century, in which peasant society played a critical role, contributed particularly to the production of iconic and recognized works related to the study of agrarian class struggle, primitive accumulation of land, communal land management and bottom-up peasant land rights. [1] The original explorations into the Russian peasant land tenure – its ill-conceived and widely debated backwardness, customary social organization and political-economic characteristics – have been central to this scholarship. However, since similar issues around the political economy of rural life were examined in detail at the turn of the century, scholarly interest regarding the study of land privatization in Russia lost its global center stage. Despite the foundational role of communal land management in critical agrarian studies, Russia's complicated relationships with private property are often taken for granted, without much needed reference and reflections on the early traditions of the Russian land commune and its later conceptualizations.

Russia remains a challenge for understanding property in land, constituting what Maxim Trudolyubov recently termed the "tragedy of property" [2] – or the chronic inability of landowners to acquire and legitimately maintain the bundle of guarantees often assigned to the right of ownership in a modern liberal sense. There are, thus, two issues concerning the Russian property debate that call for more consideration. Firstly, practices of land privatization do not fall easily under the Eurocentric conceptual frames of private property, often leading to mistaken judgements. The right-bearing quality of property in modern Western discourse particularly faces challenges in the study of post-socialist land relationships that find a better explanation through alternative frameworks of "debts, obligations, and liabilities," "slow violence," "dispersed dispossession" or "fuzzy" qualities of property in the context of incomplete and ambiguous land rights. [3] Secondly, the proliferations of informal property regimes and a complicated legacy of collective land management found in pre- and post-socialist Russia have been either perceived as a temporary stage prior to property or systemically lacking in global discourse on the topic, while they still require a more careful investigation.

The conceptual potential of alternative property relationships developed in Russian rural society is rather underutilized despite the recent turns to decolonize prop-

erty from a myriad of regional perspectives. This comes as a surprise in a geographic discipline that has recently undertaken a long project of conceptual decentering and decolonization of space/power relationships from the 'containers' of Anglo-American knowledge production. The decolonial project, however, has been successfully accomplished in relation to the fundamental concepts, such as state, nation or territory. [4] Yet, property is one concept that most often still remains grounded in the ideas of legitimate ownership, individual rights and clearly defined boundaries. [5] However, some recent works have already started to question the fundamental nature of property embedded in Eurocentric rationality. [6]

Analyzing collectivist property regimes as a clear-cut alternative to Western ideals of land ownership would, however, be a crude oversimplification. Russia's practices of the land commune, though seen in many renowned works as an antipode to capitalist relationships (e.g. works of Lenin, Marx and Luxemburg), has generated a lot of debate. The practices of 'commoning' in the Russian countryside have not only produced stateless enclaves for the collective struggle of peasant societies [7], but were also swiftly rediscovered and utilized by the influential statist philosophical movements to denote Russia's otherness from the West and, at the same time, develop different forms of subjugation and colonialism. Throughout the early 20th century, these customary traditions of peasant relationships with land were rediscovered by Russian intellectuals only to frame and legitimize new practices of spatial appropriation in its near neighbors and amongst its own populations. It is with the intention to uncover these complex relationships that I take a careful account of the Russian practices of collective property relationships and their various representations in the traditions of Russian political thought as the main point for discussion in this essay.

The Russian land commune, or the famous *mir,* was simultaneously a space of peasant resistance to capitalist pressures and a strategic site intended for the accumulation of capital and the exploitation of the landless. As Rosa Luxemburg believed, *mir* could potentially offer a "shortcut to the blessed land of socialism and lead directly to a higher social development […], without the capitalist phase and its attendant misery as experienced in Western Europe."[8] There were also others who saw the land commune as an anachronism of the past and a backbone of Russian "backwardness" [9], as often considered by many proponents who used the means of property to "distinguish civilized man from the primitives." [10] With this, one could use Russia not only as a characteristic example of the "tragedy of property," but also the tragedy of the commune. While landed property is often used to "fix people to territory" and provide for rightful form of ownership [11], the early Soviet state managed to utilize the land commune to achieve the forced attachment of mass labor and uncontrolled subjects to the soil and limit their mobilization. These contested ways of framing land use and ownership contribute significantly, if not directly, to the 'unrule of law' and the rise of landed oligarchy in Russia today. Russia's possession of one of the biggest mineral and energy reserves and the largest masses of productive (and largely unused) arable lands [12], which were opened up for foreign investments after the 1998 financial crisis and the 2001 Land Code, created a murky ground for further speculations. This picture intensified with the global recession of 2008 that was met with a wave of a full-blown land grabs and contributed to the consolidation of the land in the hands of the few.

This essay aims to put a start to a project of uncovering the liberatory practices of collectivist land ownership throughout Russia's late imperial and early Soviet history, while, at the same time, understanding how this outright rejection of the Eurocentric ideals of 'property' by the Russian state often legitimized new modes of appropriation and exploitation. After briefly illustrating the history of the Russian land commune and its 'discovery' by the intellectual society in the following section, I explore its role as a 'decolonial' construct in Russia's political and geographic thought that justified other modes of appropriation and dispossession. This essay relies on extensive archival material collected during my fieldwork at the federal and municipal archives in Moscow and Saint Petersburg [13], and the tropes of discourse analysis of agrarian periodicals, 19th century imperial societies' surveys of the land commune, and iconic works in Russian critical agrarian studies.

(Re)discovering the Russian land commune

Land was foremost 'God's property' for peasants in the margins, distributed equally among those who worked it. [14] This 'sacralization' of soil in traditional Russian society was historically grounded in the common right to land that had been exercised in the peasant land commune for centuries. Urban intellectuals and members of imperial par-

ties termed the commune *'obshchina,'* derived from the same root as 'society' or the 'common' *(obshchestvo or obshchii),* while, by contrast, peasants would use an older customary term *'mir'* to describe collective land tenure, which could also be directly translated as the whole 'World.' These contested etymologies often overlapped, but the members of the commune most often used the latter term. [15]

Despite the shared and unregulated nature of landed relationships, the land commune itself was a complex spatial unit of production. Its unique 'peasant geometry' was first 'scientifically' analyzed and rediscovered by urban intellectuals, who tried to apply the logics of classification and calculation to understand and quantify the phenomena of collective land management deeply engrained in East Slavic culture. The spatial and social organization of *mir* in the Russian Empire was initially analyzed in a survey collected by the Imperial Free Economic Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture and Husbandry and the Russian Geographical Society in 1877. Both agencies issued and distributed two surveys across the district statistical committees and local councils with questions ranging from the demographic composition of each commune to requests for freehand drawings made by the peasants of each commune's spatial plan, division into land strips and norms of land redistribution. Surprisingly, this curious but strategic surveying of the life in the Russian land commune by governmental institutions also coincided with a contrary popular movement of 'going into the people' (or *khozhdenie v narod),* during which young intellectuals, students and revolutionaries dressed in peasant clothes roamed villages learning about peasant lifestyles and inciting the locals to revolt against the state, that achieved its height in 1874.

Regarding the territorial delineation of the *mir,* the surveys identified arable lands divided into long and narrow strips assigned to each household, along with hayfields, forests, and pastures open for everyone's use. [16] Land redivision among the emancipated peasants was structured around a normative unit that was based on either demographic characteristic, such as the amount of male power or 'male souls' *(dushy),* number of 'eaters' *(edoki)* and 'foreheads' *(lby),* or socioeconomic parameters, such as the size of capital stock *(kopeiki)* or amount of 'good' or 'bad' land divided into quarters *(sokhi)*. [17] The unit of measure of the land itself, however, varied widely across the regions and was hard to classify. Most communes underwent yearly land repartitioning to meet changes in the demographic composition of the households or adapt to economic instabilities, which was fairly progressive compared to peasant societies worldwide. This right to communal territorialization "defined the very essence of *obshchina"* and was seen by many as "one of the most important functions of the Russian land commune" with little analogy found in world history. [18] While serfs were assigned to use the land, owned by their seigneurs, it was still repartitioned and redistributed collectively by the village community, unlike in Western Europe and England in particular, where peasant households held hereditary rights to one or several scattered strips of land. [19]

The commune at the turn of the 20th century became a disputed ground for debate. The philosophical movement of the Slavophiles praised the ancient origins of the _obshchina and its emancipatory capacity of "accommodating social needs […] and interests of the people." [20] While the populist proto-socialist intellectual groups celebrated the commune's potential to achieve the "highest socialist form skipping the negation of private property," since it represented a possibility of a revolutionary separation from the logics of capital and the "assembling of an autonomous alternative sociality". [21] Others believed that the commune was a mechanism of state control and a tool for tying people to the soil – one of the main aspects and goals of serfdom. Richard Pipes, for example, a renowned historian of Russia, has argued the state knew that if peasants were allowed to abandon the soil, they would "roam the country in search of easier and more remunerative work." [22] In order to accommodate serfdom, the peasants were attached to the commune where it existed or this attachment was introduced where it had been unknown previously.

Despite wide-ranging debates about the purpose and the history of the Russian land commune, it became the center stage for the revolutionary struggles throughout the early 20th century. Peasant customs of land management and collective relationships with the soil became the core of this struggle, as the peasant land law was based on oral tradition and informal agreement, incomprehensible to the statist measures and unknown in feudal Europe, where the rule of private property prevailed. The commune, surrounded by the growing industrial pressures, proletarianization of rural labor and capitalist land reforms, offered peasants the means of

resistance and revealed itself as a "generator of egalitarian ideology, and a school for collective actions of the kind capable of turning into well-organized revolt overnight" as Teodor Shanin, a prominent sociologist, believed. [23] While both feudalism and socialism were built on the homogeneous systems of land ownership, meticulous practices of customary territorialization persisted in the commune. [24] Without any hand from the state, these practices served as a core of the commune's own autonomous and democratic territorial reproduction from the bottom-up.

Exploiting landed collectivism

The ideas of commoning, derived from the historical experiences of the Russian land commune, were swiftly mobilized by Russia's key political and philosophical movements to not only highlight its difference from private property but also to denote the country's unique path of development dissimilar to the West. The knowledge about collective land practices was extrapolated to construct a new decolonial project of alternative socio-spatial relationships outside the Western traditions of private property and modernity. Depicting European experiences of collective land management as "the meeting of persons brought together by chance, whose relations were established as much by the governmental and legislative measures from above, as by customs and traditions" [25], *mir* became an episteme of egalitarian society and liberatory land rights. In the words of Boris Chicherin, the Russian jurist and political philosopher, based on the ancient beginnings of Slavonic law, *mir* was a "family at large, it was the owner of the land," in contrast to the means of European land ownership based on individualism and scientific rationality. [26] These ideas became the core principle of the leading philosophical movements of Narodnichestvo ('peopleism'), Pochvenichestvo ('return to the native soil') and Slavophilism, that searched for a suitable image to illustrate Russia's political project of the unity of *narod* (the people) and their collective ownership of all-Slavic soil that spills beyond Russia's boundaries.

Other political movements used this seemingly decolonial imaginary of 'commoning' to argue for the creation of a large imperial entity of Slavdom or a pan-Slavic nation based on the common Russian identity with the East Slavic culture. Building on the ideas of late Slavophilism, the Russian ethnologist and geographer Vladimir Lamanskiy developed a conceptual category of *'sredinniy mir'* (or the median world) to describe the unique aspects of the East Slavic realm that separated Russia from Europe. One of the core differences between the Greek-Slavic and Roman-Germanic worlds, Lamanskiy argued, lay in the persistence of the collective way of life in the former, or in the "extreme dissimilarity of relations between the principles of collective and private, unity and diversity, centripetal and centrifugal forces." [27] The Greek-Slavic world, in his words, was not familiar with the "Western kind of landless peasant; it lived under the beneficial rule of family life and communal self-governance." [28] Lamanskiy theorized *sredinniy mir* as a borderless concept, as it practiced no rules of uniform land repartition based on property and its unity was ensured by the absence of its internal redivision and bordering. The endless Slavic world, for Slavophiles, not only united the people under the rule of the commune but also despised territorial sovereignty and boundaries of other nations in order to allow for its continuous expansion. Hence, ideas of the 'borderless world' became the episteme of Russia's geographical thinking and practice, as the state undertook projects of mass exploration and exploitation of its extensive resource frontiers at the beginning of the 20th century.

Discussion: From the tragedy of the commune to the tragedy of property

After the socialist revolution, the ideas of commoning were brought back to introduce a new logic of 'people's property.' Land was still worked and held collectively, yet, it became measured, rationed and controlled by the state. The means of commoning re-emerged in the form of collectively-owned state enterprises to denote a new idea of the Soviet commune as a strategic unit of production and rational redistribution of resources, thus, attaching millions of peasant workers to the soil and under central control. The commune was temporarily revived in the form of state enterprises but lost its independent power to the new administrative structure that extended the old *mir* "from the political microcosm of the commune to the wider scale of the state." [29]

Russia's decolonial temperaments regarding collective land ownership versus private property left a local villager with neither the latter nor the former. [30] Land ownership in today's Russia is no more secure, even with the existence of legal property rights and open land markets, while ideas for recollecting the all-Slavic lands drive

Russia's geopolitical desires across its near neighbors. From the cases of the 2010 land restitution reform for the Russian Orthodox Church and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (popular amongst the Russian people) to the recent blunt assault and violent war on Ukraine waged by Russia's president Vladimir Putin in February 2022, ideas of landed commoning, a borderless world and the accompanying discourses on the denial of territorial rights – from 'property' to 'sovereignty' – have returned as a motto for the Russian state. Hence, shifting our scholarly radars and learning from a situated position in the region is not only urgent for understanding these events but beneficial for decentering familiar geographic scholarship on the topic of space and power from its Eurocentric knowledge containers.

Notes:

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06

For Other Logistical Worlds: Accretion and Infrastructure in the Making of Anaklia Port *

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For the past decade, the village of Anaklia has been set to become a transit node for goods and people, aimed at positioning Georgia as a key juncture amongst global logistics networks. This short intervention builds on insights from the ethnographic fieldwork performed in and around Anaklia between 2017 and 2019. It shows that fragments of an abject past are visible in the friction between global and local practices of future-making that came to populate Anaklia. These fragments, despite being ostensibly ignored by the contemporary promise of seamless connectivity waged by the future hub, underwrite its construction and sustain its developers' claims to expertise. As the pursuit of logistical connectivity becomes the organizing principle for ever larger parts of the global economy, this ethnographic inquiry can work against the grain of Georgia's recent 'logistical revolution' towards a global reading of the forms of alterity produced by contemporary regimes of accumulation.

For Other Logistical Worlds: Accretion and Infrastructure in the Making of Anaklia Port *

Evelina Gambino, University of Cambridge

The village of Anaklia is at the northwestern edge of the Republic of Georgia in the South Caucasus, only a few kilometers from Abkhazia, a *de facto* state and site of multiple conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the past decade, this small settlement has been set to become a transit node for goods and people, aimed at positioning Georgia as a key juncture amongst global logistics networks. The infrastructural development of this site between 2015 and 2019, that included plans to build the largest deep seaport in the country, a smart city and a free industrial zone, was conducted through a public-private partnership between the Georgian government and the Anaklia Development Consortium, a multinational corporation composed of TBC, Georgia's largest private bank, and the United States company Conti Group.

During this period, the future projected on Anaklia by its developers contained a promise of newness and progress, intermixed into a *futurism* of sorts. The transformation of this marginal village into a logistics hub was described as of the "project of the century" [1] capable of catapulting the country into prosperity. The developments resonated simultaneously with the emerging global script of connectivity: the language of logistics made of measuring units unknown to the lay observer, such as the TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit, the measure of a container's capacity), references to faraway places and processes, such as the one implied by the name 'post-Panamax' used to describe a type of vessel so big that it did not fit into the original locks of the Panama Canal, and shared fetishes, such as the widespread appreciation of the simple object that is the shipping container. Fragments of an abject past are visible in the friction between global and local futurisms that came to populate Anaklia. As Nikhil Anand has suggested, "infrastructures accrete. They gather and crumble incrementally and slowly, over time, through labor that is at once ideological and material." [2] It is with these accretions that this short text is concerned.

During a meeting with Keti Bochorishvili, the chief executive officer of Anaklia City, the smart metropolis and business center planned to rise on Anaklia's wetlands, she shared with me her excitement for the boundless experimentation that is set to give life to this "city yet to come." [3] Keti remarked that "Anaklia is perfect!" as a space of experiment. This is because, unlike the rest of the country, "we do not risk destroying anything! There is simply *nothing* there!" In contrast to Bochorishvili's statement, this paper points instead to how the past – and the visions of the future that populated it – interacts with the present activities in Anaklia on different scales. Similar to all places, contemporary Anaklia is a site where multiple layers of relationships and powers intersect. In particular, unlike Bochorishvili's appreciation of this territory as an open frontier where experiments could take place unbound by a concern for existing lifeworlds, I will show that the contemporary promise of seamless connectivity waged by the future hub is based on a simultaneous disavowal of and dependency on the (re)productive nexus that sustains the lifeworlds it seeks to envelop.

This short intervention builds on insights from the ethnographic fieldwork that I have performed in and around Anaklia and other infrastructural sites between 2017 and 2019 as part of my PhD. What I aim to sketch is a certain kind of work upon which infrastructural futures

depend. This work ties the recent and more distant history of post-Soviet Georgia into a weave deployed by different agents of capitalist accumulation in order to make their promised futures *look smooth*. [4] Amidst efforts to portray this borderland as an autonomous and "international" location, the *singularity* of Anaklia's history is reactivated by contemporary infrastructural efforts. [5] Attention to this singularity, as Tariq Jazeel has recently argued, contributes to a decolonial geography of the present, one that works through "fragments that present tantalising cues to other histories" [6] and which are scattered within the dominant textualizations of the worlds we inhabit. As the pursuit of logistical connectivity becomes the organizing principle for ever larger parts of the global economy [7], this ethnographic inquiry can work against the grain of Georgia's recent 'logistical revolution' towards a global reading of the forms of alterity produced by contemporary regimes of accumulation.

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Image 1: Abandoned Soviet-era tea plantation in Kakhati, West Georgia, 2019 (source: author's photograph, Evelina Gambino)

Meurneoba/Khoziaistvo

During my fieldwork in Anaklia, I sought to explore the actual, existing infrastructural relationships that underwrote the futuristic projects investing the village. While no large infrastructure was ever built in Anaklia, the village has, nevertheless, developed in relationship to the complex infrastructural networks of the Soviet rural economy. When speaking about the previous organization of life in Anaklia, my interlocutors would often start their recollection by saying: "ადრე როცა აქ იყო მეურნეობა" (before when there was a rural economy here). The Georgian word 'meurneoba' (მეურნეობა) can indicate the organization of any kind of substantive economy, from the household and agriculture to "virtually any nexus of production and need fulfilment." [8] The term is related to the noun 'meurne' that means 'guardian/manager' and, in some cases, 'carer.' [9] Unlike the English word 'economy,' that, as many have argued, has come to describe a sphere of calculations and the accounting of money, considered separate from the needs-based organization of life [10], 'meurneoba' groups together all of the activities geared at the production and reproduction of a determinate space – from the household to the factory/plantation to regional organization. As such, it is used in combination with different nouns to indicate a wide variety of organizational forms: 'msoflio (world) meurneoba,' for instance, indicates 'the global economy.' However, it is mostly used in reference to the activities composing the 'rural economy.' It was often deployed during the Soviet Union with the prefix 'kol,' a shortening of 'kolmeurneoba' (collective), to indicate the collectivized agricultural production around which the Soviet rural economy was structured. The composite noun 'soflis-meurneoba,' preceded by the word 'sofeli' (village), instead, means agriculture. Nowadays, this last meaning is very common, even when the term is used on its own. Reducing this complex noun exclusively to agriculture, however, risks erasing the lifeworlds and epistemologies that converge within it. The socioeconomic activities taking place in and around Anaklia during the Soviet Union are all described by my informants as contained within a 'meurneoba'; such rural activities, however, are inclusive of industrial relations, reproductive practices and an organizational sense of place that is lost by translating their description simply as agriculture.

When the word 'meurneoba' is used to describe organizational forms that took place during the Soviet Union, what emerges is a conjunction between the reproductive nexus of rural lifeworlds and large-scale logistical planning. Stephen Collier describes the infrastructural networks that composed that gigantic system that was the Soviet Union in his study of post-Soviet biopolitics [11] Focusing on mundane structures, such as the pipes of the heating systems in a medium-sized industrial city, Collier argues that the Soviet system was assembled through a form of "infrastructural biopolitics," where processes of production were inextricably linked to the provision of life of Soviet citizens and of the Union as a whole. The complex intersection of elements at the core of Soviet provision was summarized by the word 'khoziaistvo.' [12] This term describes 'socioeconomic operations' as a substantive nexus of (re)productive activities to be managed by Soviet internal organization. The Russian root 'khoz,' derived from the peasant's household, is closely linked to problems of management, including the connotation of hospitality and ownership. [13] The linking of reproductive needs to the productive elements of the economy within the Soviet system was, thus, the basis of an effort of total planning rendered possible through infrastructural biopolitics, providing the pulsating veins of the Soviet Union. [14]

Within the Soviet #meurneoba,' therefore, similar to earlier rural organizations, what is expressed is not just a series of located productive activities, but the socioeconomic lifeworlds within which they were embedded and the logistics that kept them alive. What this terms describes is, therefore, a *logistical effort* in the most basic of senses.

According to Timothy Mitchell, a process of bordering is at the core of the creation of "the economy" in the early twentieth century. Distancing himself from Karl Polanyi's seminal account of the nineteenth century's "great transformation" [15] from substantive socioeconomics to the national economy [16], Mitchell places the creation of a separate realm of economic calculation some decades later. He argues that "Between the 1930s and 1950s, economists, sociologists, national statistical agencies, international and corporate organizations, and government programs formulated the concept of the economy, meaning the totality of monetarized exchanges within a defined space." [17] Rather than just a different way to account for things that were already happening, Mitchell argues, "the economy was made" [18], and it is in this process that "boundaries between the monetary and the nonmonetary, national and foreign, consumption and

investment, public and private, nature and technology, tangible and intangible, owner and nonowner" [19] were set as the borders of what belonged to the economic realm and what was external to it or, in many cases, an aberration.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, provided a new terrain for the reinstatement of such boundaries and the strengthening of economic rationality through the promotion of the market as a sphere of profit making, separate and above the reproduction of life. [20] This mode of knowing and organizing the (re)production of life that had animated Soviet life, in substance, came to be dispossessed. [21] Interestingly, as different scholars argue, the substantive nexus that Collier describes to be at the heart of Soviet infrastructural biopolitics was also the point of departure for the myriad of logistical underworlds that constituted the Soviet "second economy." [22] The informal networks that provided Soviet citizens with a lifeline of supplies and activities that were prohibited by state planning, often misrepresented as a latent form of 'market economy,' was, instead, moved by creative practices of needs fulfilment, reciprocity, exchange and more. [23] The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, radically upset the workings and representation of these interwoven systems that came to be dispossessed from the proper order of society. Dispossession, however, as Collier shows, does not imply the disappearance of those biopolitical relationships that made up the now abject lifeworld of Soviet logistics. Sketching the ways in which this substantive nexus is reactivated by the promise of a logistical future helps to reveal the constructedness of seemingly smooth processes of accumulation. [24]

A modern khoziain?

"All projects should serve the human and his well-being. First of all, [projects] must change the life of local people radically, by increasing their income, their qualifications, job, and guaranteeing the future of their children. If all of this becomes true, it means that the port works, and that a serious contribution to Georgia's economy has been made." [25]

Mamuka Khazaradze, the then president of Anaklia Development Consortium and founder of TBC, Georgia's largest and most profitable private bank, presented himself to the Anaklia Development Consortium's Facebook followers with these words in September 2016. By placing his private enterprise at the service of people's realization and prosperity the chief executive officer showcases the stewardship and pastoral care ostensibly at the core of its private Consortium. Notably, Khazaradze's words stand in sharp contrast to the discourse of seamless logistical circulation that his corporation strives to embody. Dimitri Kumisishvili, former Minister of the Economy, commenting on Georgia's commitment to become a node of logistical connectivity, proudly declared that, thanks to years of reforms, the country is now a place where businessmen are as free to invest as they are to pull their capital out without any fear of repercussions. [26] These reforms provide the soft infrastructure for current logistical developments and, as often stated by different government and private actors, are the backbone to Georgia's competitiveness. [27] The logistification of Georgia's economy is the last step in a much longer *infrastructural* rejection of state Socialism, operated by a decennial commitment to deregulation and privatization of key sectors of its economy. [28] Khazardaze himself has certainly been a key beneficiary of these business-friendly reforms: his bank is at the forefront of the debt crisis that has been dispossessing large sections of the population since former president Mikheil Saakashvili lifted any restrictions to interest on household borrowing. [29] In this context, it might be easy to discard Khazaradze's words as hypocritical. Conversely, here I want to expose their resonance with another socioeconomic logic, the fragments of which still populate contemporary life in Georgia and that, in this case, serve as an invisible infrastructure sustaining the broken promises of logistical futurism.

Collier argues that after the collapse of the USSR, the fragmentation of Soviet khoziaistvo: "left unoccupied a crucial position in the moral economy of the Soviet and post-Soviet small city: the khoziain, that distinctive figure of Soviet neo-traditional authority. With the erosion of enterprise support for the "social" and "communal" spheres, the question was often raised (and still is raised): "kto v gorode khoziain?"– who in the city is the khoziain? This question means: Who will show concern for the health, welfare, and conditions of existence of each and every inhabitant of the city? Who will take care of our khoziaistvo?" [30]

The responsibility for managing the operations of khoziaistvo in the Soviet Union was assigned to a general director, the 'khozian,' in each district/enterprise. Understanding this figure, and its repurposing at the wake of Soviet collapse, can help us expose how the conjuring of

idealized Soviet khoziaistvo/meurneoba still sustains visions of a post- and indeed anti- Soviet logistical future.

Rather than just an uncomplicated attempt to reinstate Soviet organizational practices, however, Watts notes that the evocation of *khoziain* as a missing provider of pastoral care has specifically late-Soviet roots. [31] The discourse of *perestroika,* in particular, contained a promise of the restoration of a longed-for substantive management of a (re)production of the Soviet Union that had been lost in the years of thievery and incompetence that preceded *glastnost.* [32] Real patrons were, thus, men who took pride in serving their community, as opposed to the existing managers who stole from it. The fragmentation of the entire system that followed Gorbachev's reforms, however, left the hope for reinstating substantive management, as well as many others, frustrated. The post-Soviet longing for a *real khoziain,* therefore, emerges, to a large extent, from the transposition of a desire for an idealized figure of fair management from late state socialism to its successor: the market economy. The same 'market economy' that expelled care and reproductive practices from the calculations at its core. As Collier notes, it is indicative that "the question *'kto v gorode khoziain?'* is most often posed when those who ought to play the role of the *khoziain* are somehow failing." [33] Rather than a specific person, therefore, often the search for a *khoziain* is the expression of a lack. Not necessarily antagonistic to the market, yet incorporating the productivist and pastoral ethics of Soviet planning and, before, of pre-Soviet rural economies. [34] The post-Soviet *khoziain,* therefore, emerges from an "interesting polysemy between the founding principles of market economy, private property and enterprise, and the qualities of wisdom, fairness and stewardship that had inspired the reforms of the late Soviet Union." [35] As such, as Watts notices, it became used by both the proponents of privatizations and citizens hoping for fairer conditions.

According to Hannah Appel, "rendering capitalism licit is, in part, about the ways we ethically partition responsibility for 'others,' and how those partitions are at once individually embodied and materialized in corporate planning." [36] It is within this ambiguity of the post-Soviet *khoziain* that Khazaradze positioned himself in his communications with different publics by feeding on Soviet memories and the desires left unrealized in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. [37] The substantive nexus, while nominally rejected in the name of market efficiency and competitiveness, is instead deployed by the top managers of the Anaklia Development Consortium to sustain the logistical future. These nostalgic echoes, incorporated in the speeches of Mamuka Khazaradze, the company's chief executive officer, act as a "a source of energies, the condition of success, the possibility to reproduce" his own idea of the future. [38]

Khazaradze's performance as a *khoziain,* appropriates memories of the past for its own needs and turns them into convenient mythologies. Tajana Thelen describes the maintenance of certain superficial care provisions in companies undergoing the transition from socialist to market economy in her study of veteran care in East Germany after the collapse of the GDR. As the company she observed underwent a profound reshaping, certain care provisions for their retired workers, such as the annual trip for former employees or New Year celebrations, were kept in place. Thelen's interlocutors within the new management related to her that keeping these activities was no longer a matter of providing holistic care for the company employees, such as had been the case during Socialism, instead, it was starting to be understood as a matter of publicity and corporate social responsibility. [39] Despite this shift, the limited care provision still in place came to be valued by its recipients very highly as "secular rituals" [40] that reassure their belonging to the enterprise in the context of the crumbling social order within which most of their careers had developed. Such success amongst the retirees, Thelen concludes "is not based on the provision of better services, but rather on mimicking former state care, viewed as holistic and emotional." [41] Khazaradze's claim to care is mobilized by a similar torsion of meaning and effective provision. Building on memories and desires for a substantivism ethos, it, nevertheless, distorts it through the prism of capitalist corporate managerialism. [42]

Rather than just belonging to a forgotten infrastructural underworld, the socioeconomic worlds of (post-)Soviet substantivity are channeled even by those in charge of developing the logistical future. A form of restorative nostalgia, however, does not work to actually materialize substantivity through appropriate provisions, instead, Khazaradze mimics a commitment to people's well-being by imbuing his communications with powerful echoes of the post-Soviet *khoziain.*

Conclusion

"As gatherings, infrastructures are brought into being out of a multiplicity of historical forms and technopolitical relations that, while bound together, seldom fully cohere." [43]

I have sketched throughout this text some of the ways in which Georgia's logistical futures are overwritten [44] on the sedimented world of meurneoba. Not a straightforward relationship, the kinship of logistical capitalism with these other infrastructural histories is instead subjected to different layers of obfuscation, amnesia, straightforward denial and misrepresentations. Rather than being exclusively a post-Soviet phenomenon, the erasure of incongruences and heterogeneities from the smooth narrative of capitalist development and its economic rationality is, instead, at the very core of the making of what we know as global capitalism and, indeed, of its deconstruction. Upon close inspection, fragments of other worlds can be detected to pierce these apparently seamless surfaces like shards, "they are a heterogeneity that makes possible the logic of capital, and thus ensures both its powers and its failures." [45]

Notes:

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[16] Not only Polany but Tribe (1978), Dumont (1977), Buck-Morss (1995) and others have argued that the economy became a distinct sphere of social practice and intellectual knowledge in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Keith Tribe, Land, Labour, and Economic Discourse. London: Routledge, 1978; Louis Dumont, From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977; Susan Buck-Morss, Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display, in: Critical Inquiry 21 (2002) 2, pp. 434–467.

[17] Mitchell, Rule of Experts, p. 4.

[18] Mitchell, Rule of Experts, p. 5.

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[20] Mitchell, Rule of Experts, p. 272.

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[26] This statement was made during the 2017 Belt and Road Forum in Tbilisi, reported in my field notes.

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07 Land and human-soil relations in Southeast Europe

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This short piece presents some of the different ways in which land has been engaged in multi-disciplinary scholarship and proposes human-soil relations as another possible mode of investigation. I, firstly, review some of the existing approaches to studying land and highlight a particular absence of Southeast Europe (SEE) within this literature. In the second section, I turn to a brief overview of land issues in SEE by drawing on my field-work in agricultural governance and foreign direct investment in Serbia in 2016, and the early findings of my current project. In the final part, I conclude by reiterating the potential of studying human-soil relations in SEE, highlighting not only what we can learn from scholarship that has engaged land politics in SEE but also asking what else we might find out if we see land as different constellations of human-nature relationships.

Land and human-soil relations in Southeast Europe

Katarina Kusic, University of Bremen

Using, owning, and living with land has become a central topic in scholarly and policy discussions. Southeast Europe (SEE) sits uneasily within these developments. On the one hand, the strong developmentalist trajectory of the post-socialist restoration of capitalism is claiming fields, rivers, forests, and cities, and encountering resistance along its path. On the other hand, the peculiar position of SEE outside the usual framing of the Global South removes it both from scholarship on the global land rush and the struggles for land that we see in Asia, South Americ,a and Africa. Within SEE, scholarship on land examined the complex processes of socialist modernization and the subsequent neoliberalisation. [1] Land, however, has not been a topic in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship in the region. [2] Given the intimate relationship between decolonial thought and thinking *from* specific territories [3], the omission of land from the current efforts to develop decolonial thinking in SEE is far-reaching: How can we think of alternative ways of living without the connections to land on which these visions would be based? The decolonial impulse when paying attention to land in the Balkans is, thus, not only to analyze colonialism and its manifold historical and present relations but also to study different ways of living with land as the basis for imagining different futures.

This short piece presents some of the different ways in which land has been engaged in multidisciplinary scholarship, and proposes human-soil relations as another possible mode of investigation. Human-soil relations are made and remade as people interact with soils to make land property, an object of policy, and a way of life. This approach brings together the efforts to capture the 'strangeness' of land as an object through its malleability and relationality [4], the importance of humanity's relationship to soil in the unfolding of modernity [5], and an understanding of nature, including its soils, not as given but as products of specific relations in particular times and places. Human-soil relations, therefore, cast land not (only) as property or an object of policy but as a living engagement that speaks beyond the themes of political and economic transformations. In doing this, I hope to position SEE rurality as a specific epistemic space that does not 'fit' either the Global North or South. [6]

In the following, I, firstly, review some of the existing approaches to studying land and highlight a particular absence of SEE within this literature. In the second section, I turn to a brief overview of land issues in SEE by drawing on my own fieldwork in Serbia in 2016 and the early findings of my current project. In the final part, I conclude by reiterating the potential of studying human-soil relationships in SEE.

Approaches to land

Land has forcefully entered both scholarly and media discussions with the rise of land grabbing since 2008. Land grabbing is commonly defined as a process where powerful national, international, and economic actors acquire large pieces of land and threaten the rights and livelihoods of local communities, smallholders, and indigenous peoples. An abundant literature on land grabbing and large-scale land acquisitions investigates the drivers and effects of the global land rush in particular contexts [7], highlights the transformations of state and global governance in these processes [8], and identifies East, Central and SEE as vulnerable to land grabbing due to their complex histories of post-socialist property transformations. [9]

The 'first generation' of this literature relied on problematic methodologies and utilized simplifying binaries – local and foreign, big corporations and small peasants, and resistance and acceptance. This made the complexities of specific outcomes difficult to access. Mandacı and Tutan [10], for example, writing about Serbia, reproduce the discourses of 'peasants' and 'smallholders' that are so common in reports of international non-governmental organizations. While their article makes important points about the continuities of land government in the Balkans, my own fieldwork in Serbia – which included interviews with people who contested land deals in different stages – complicated this understanding of resistance to land grabbing as coming from smallholders. [11] I was told in conversations with the people involved, that large landowners usually organized these protests in defense of their own privileged positions. Where smaller producers were involved, they often followed scripts prepared by those with more land, money, and power.

The 'second generation' of land grabbing literature developed significantly both methodologically and conceptually but stayed away from SEE. Here, scholars turned to a wider study of the "ways in which agrarian life and livelihoods shape and are shaped by the politics, economics and social worlds of modernity" and moved to study "the social life of soil." [12] These critical agrarian studies continue the work of peasant studies of the 1960s and 1970s that were institutionalized in the expanded Journal of Peasant Studies (from 2009) and the Journal of Agrarian Change. Interestingly, neither of these journals addresses the post-socialist transformations of rural life and labor in SEE. Pondering why this might be, I think, is important when trying to locate our own scholarship within the wider global political economies of knowledge production. A possible answer might be that SEE is missed in a wider condition of Eurocentric orientations that focus on issues and topics defined in the Global North. This, however, cannot be true for the journals mentioned above which are known for their global scope and activist character. On the contrary, I suggest that understanding why SEE is missing from these discussions requires one to consider three overlapping dimensions of knowledge production: global hierarchies that divide the world into 'theory-' and 'data-generating' spaces; the incompatibility of slow violence with neoliberal knowledge production; and gatekeeping concepts that govern what we see in and how we approach particular regions and spaces.

Regarding global hierarchies of knowledge production, it is by now well argued that non-Western spaces are overlooked as epistemically generative locations and instead approached as containers of data and laboratories of policies. [13] In short, there is a "geopolitics of knowledge" that refers to "a geographic unevenness in where knowledge is produced, for whom and with what effects." [14] In response, spaces in the Global South were recast as loci of potential decolonization and are now approached as important archives able to provincialize Europe. This process, while providing a powerful critique of Eurocentrism and pointing to concrete alternatives, paradoxically 'doubly' removed East Europe from the discussion: East Europe cannot claim a space in a conversation about the relationship between former colonies and the colonizers. It is "not quite North" and "not quite South." [15]

When rurality and land are studied in SEE, they are seen through particular "gatekeeping concepts" that predefine what the important issues in specific regions are, thus, removing them from wider knowledge production and theory building. [16] Rebecca Kay and colleagues, for example, highlight how understandings of East European rurality are overdetermined by macro-changes in agriculture, land and property rights. [17] Petr Jehlička similarly argues against seeing food systems in exclusively economic terms. Moreover, he and his colleagues explain how such terms are products of global inequalities of knowledge production and illustrate the potential and importance of studying East European food systems differently. [18] In my own current project on human-soil relations in SEE, I aim to see land outside of the conceptual frame of post-socialist transformation, understood as the macro-restructuring of economic policy and property. Instead, I want to treat it as an outcome of particular human-nature relations that both shape and reflect processes on multiple scales. By moving away from established gatekeeping concepts, I hope to redefine questions that drive our research and ask what else we might learn from particular ways in which humans and soils are entangled.

This also requires moving away from the spectacles of violence that capture the attention of the public, funders and scholars seeking to be politically relevant. Spectacular violence has been easily found in SEE: The prevalence of studies that examine wartime violence and postwar reconstruction is unsurprising. Within studies of rurality, however, the need for a concrete understanding

of violence – such as land grabbing and agricultural restructuring – might further obscure important processes of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" that happens "gradually and out of sight." [19]

Alexander Vorbrugg writing about post-Soviet Russia shows that understanding the lives of his interlocutors requires moving beyond thinking about land and land grabbing to thinking about dispersed processes of dispossession that transform the "social life of soil" in less spectacular ways. [20] This happens in SEE through structural disadvantages and historical developments that contribute to two simultaneous processes: on the one hand, the devaluation of land and agricultural production, and, on the other hand, the European Union (EU) mandated reconfiguration of rural areas within the 'multifunctional' (rather than agricultural) understanding of rural development.

Vorbrugg noticed "forms of violence which seemed rather uneventful, drawn-out, and distant: decisions taken elsewhere, the piecemeal disintegration of places and lives, and the successive and partly tangled crises of Soviet and post-Soviet periods" [21] during his fieldwork. My own fieldwork in Serbia pointed to similar processes: While there were occasional events that drew attention to foreign direct investment in agricultural land and changes in ownership legislature, the stories and images I encountered pointed to anything but spectacle. They were roads slowly left to rot, former socially owned cooperatives abandoned to crumble, stories of migration, old age in deprivation, and aborted efforts of collective contestation. These stories are reflected in the emerging studies of rural inequality in the region that highlight not only economic deprivation but the overall feeling of "being stuck," particularly prominent among young people [22] It is precisely this lack of spectacle (further normalized through a narrative of 'post-socialist transition' and the positing of EU membership as a teleological development goal) that removes rural areas in post-Yugoslav spaces from both public and academic attention.

Governing land in SEE

Anthropological studies of land relationships and politics have engaged these slower processes through extensive fieldwork. They highlight ways in which land takes on meaning and structures sociopolitical outcomes. Even though East European post-socialist decollectivization from the 1990s onwards received a spate of attention [23], Yugoslav spaces remain largely overlooked. There are important exceptions that study, for example, agricultural land relations in Serbia [24] or issues of land property in refugee return in Croatia. [25] While they show the potential and importance of studying land in SEE, they remain few and far apart.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, even before land moved to the status of private property central to liberalism [26], the political and ideological visions of different regimes reshaped landscapes. Yugoslavia's ideological vision was similarly imprinted in land policy. The 1960s are referenced in Branko Horvat's account of the Yugoslav economic system as the time when Yugoslavia had "the most egalitarian distribution of land in the world" – a point of international pride. [27] This international positioning – the split with Stalin and the integration with the world (Western) markets – shaped Yugoslav land policy and its legacies. The split with Stalin (along with the resistance to efforts of collectivization) enabled Yugoslavia to abandon collectivization of land as its goal. [28] In the reworking of Yugoslav socialism away from Stalinist ideology, the state was imagined to ultimately wither away, and, thus, could not take ownership of land. Consequently, land ownership in Yugoslavia was not as thoroughly transformed as in other socialist spaces, such as Romania and Albania. Cooperative ownership after 1953 was transformed into social ownership through the process of *podruštvljavanje* ('socializing property'), as the 'basis of socialist transformation.' Peasants' private holdings were limited, and they expanded by buying land in socially owned enterprises. Peasants in Yugoslavia transformed notions of ownership and the amount of socially owned land grew accordingly. [29]

The importance of this change cannot be overstated: other communist countries with histories of forced collectivization entered the 1990s with large areas of land in state ownership and embarked on complex processes of restitution. [30] Yugoslavia, on the other hand, had a smaller percentage of state-owned land but similarly intricate difficulties of determining who exactly owned the land that was accumulated as 'social' ownership. In Serbia,

for example, even though the 1996 Constitution once again recognized cooperative ownership (after merging it with social and state ownership in 1962), the land owned by cooperatives was never untangled from the socially owned enterprises that used the cooperative land. When the 2006 Constitution removed the category of social ownership (turning it into private ownership), the land was not returned to cooperatives but registered as the ownership of the state enterprises. [31]

This set the stage for an incredibly complex and corrupt process in which land was turned into state property to facilitate privatization. The ruined agricultural companies were worthless without the land attached to them, while, according to a document prepared for the Food and Agriculture Organization in 2006, around 70 % of all state-owned enterprises in Serbia at the time were in agricultural production and food processing. [32] This made the sector crucial for privatization, but without land, there would be no interested buyers. [33]

Today, there are a few commonly debated issues in agricultural land use in SEE: the small average plot condemned for its lack of productivity that invites consolidation efforts; the preoccupation with unproductive 'wastelands'; and the ownership legislature that must deal with the increasing allure of EU capital markets. Serbia, for example, signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU which guaranteed EU nationals the right to buy agricultural and forest land in Serbia from September 1, 2017. The issue was exaggerated by the fact that previous EU accessions included moratoriums on the liberalization of the land market that could subsequently be prolonged. Serbia, for reasons unknown, did not even try to negotiate these terms.

People explained it to me in different ways: some believe that the negotiating team could not possibly imagine Serbia would still be outside the EU in 2017 and, hence, did not take the date seriously, some blamed it on stupidity and others saw private interests from people who knew they would be able to sell land acquired through privatization. No matter what the logic was, the moratorium was not negotiated and the requirements for the free movement of capital spelled out in Article 63, point 2, of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, thus, came into direct confrontation with the Law on Agricultural Land from 2006, which prohibits foreign nationals from owning agricultural land. [34] Civil society groups called for legislative changes that would, instead of *forbidding* foreign nationals from owning land (which would put it in direct confrontation with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement), *'demotivate'* foreign nationals from buying land in other ways – by setting restrictions other than the nationality of the buyer, for example, the number of years living in the village where the land is. [35] Croatia joined the EU in 2013 and has similarly limited its land markets, obtaining another three-year moratorium on the sale of agricultural land to foreign citizens in 2020.

These regulations, however, do not prohibit the sale of agricultural land to companies, and land emerges as a dimension of lucrative foreign direct investment deals. I have written elsewhere about the German and United Arab Emirates investments in Serbian agriculture and the resistance with which they were met. The investments themselves, coming from the UAE, were interpreted through the racialized categories of 'Arab' arrival [36] Croatia has similarly witnessed an increased interest in land investment. In the restructuring that followed the bankruptcy of the largest food and beverage holding in Croatia (Agrokor), all state land that was leased by the company was automatically transferred to a newly formed investor group, for a while completely obscuring who controls over 32,000 ha of state-owned agricultural land.

After Croatia, in a similar legislative change to that in Serbia in 2016, transferred the leasing of state-owned agricultural land to local municipalities, the latter in some locations refused to sign the same lease agreements with the new company, thus, opening the doors for resistance to long-term leases. [37] These efforts tellingly did not lead to open or organized contestation. Moreover, similar proposals for investment in agricultural land are also interpreted through a national security lens. This is the case with the largest Serbian landowner/meat producer, who is trying to acquire agricultural land in Eastern Slavonia – a move that the local media see as a continuation of the fights over territory in the same region in the 1990s, thus, further complicating possible politicization of resistance to such deals. [38]

These land politics both shape and reflect political processes across scales. They bring together issues of sovereignty, global value chains and local politics. Yet, accounts of the way people live with soils are missing from these stories: What attachments were reconfigured during collectivization efforts? Which knowledge was used to produce food? How did they travel as land was collectivized and peasants relocated? How did plants, animals and

humans interact to make the social life of soil meaningful? At this time, I can only start to glimpse possible answers, but it is clear that studying human-soil relationships can help complete the story of land in SEE.

Conclusion: A different approach to human-soil relationships

Thinking in terms of conjunctural geographies in conversation with decolonial thought – as the editors of the Special Issue invited us to do – reminds us of the imperative to understand capitalism and coloniality from the perspectives of those marginalized. In SEE, they are often to be found in rural spaces and with lingering connections to land and food production. No less importantly, a focus on coloniality as a global system helps us to make sense of processes in which even those who are marginalized reproduce exclusions: it can help to make sense of why a UAE company would invest in Serbia, and why those investments would be interpreted through racialized narratives of 'Arabs arriving.'

In this project, it is imperative to stay attentive to drastic changes that move without spectacle and without overt contestation. Processes of slow violence rarely invite open protest. Instead, people respond through what Vorbrugg refers to as "slow politics" that are more difficult to access for researchers who explicitly want to contribute to local struggles. [39] With the benefit of hindsight that mirrors my own difficulties in creating alliances in rural fieldwork in Serbia, Vorbrugg suggests a different approach that would "begin with" the particularities of slow violence and "seek alliances" beyond the researcher-participant horizon. [40]

Thinking through human-soil relations as making land into property, an object of policy and a way of life can help this project. It can move beyond the legacy of understanding rurality through top-down processes of agricultural reform, neoliberal restructuring, and land ownership. What happens when we take the way people engage with land as epistemically generative beyond the categories of agricultural change, property, and economic transformation? How can we make space for different knowledge, memories, and ways of being? What if the questions are not about governing land – as the previous section proceeded – but about living on, with and beside soils in multiple dimensions, temporalities and ways?

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08 Queer Feminist Border Thinking in Bishkek and Almaty

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This paper seeks to enrich Madina Tlostanova's decolonial theorizing by looking for the understandings of feminism and decolonization within feminist networks of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Due to material constraints, the scope of research had to be limited to two cities, Bishkek and Almaty, which possess the vastest networks of (queer) feminist activists, artists and academics in the respective regions. The study is based on 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews, which center the positionings of activists, academics and artists regarding Russia and 'the West' and their understandings of decolonization. Interlocutors from both cities have agreed that they feel themselves caught between two dependencies. Many experienced 'colonial' attitudes from 'Russian' activists and struggled with the tension between decolonization and feminism. The biggest challenge for most, however, was to decolonize their own activism. My interlocutors reflected on the problematic association of feminism with the 'West' and agreed on the need to situate it in the local conditions. The ways of doing this mentioned most frequently included speaking about locally relevant issues, using the local language, historical examples and traditional folklore. The main aim of these means of 'localizing' feminism was to bridge the divide between representatives of urban and rural communities. With the help of decolonial optics, my respondents made attempts to shift their understandings of feminism to become free of 'theoretical dogmatism,' thus, embodying what Tlostanova described as "border thinking."

Queer Feminist Border Thinking in Bishkek and Almaty

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Between the post-s

Russian theorist Madina Tlostanova describes the ex-Soviet space as a "void" [1] in the structure of global knowledge production, in which the Global South has a symbolic right to postcolonialism and the Global North, to postmodernism. For her, post-socialism or post-communism as a theoretical lens is insufficient to grasp the "postsocialist, postcolonial and post imperial overtones [that] intersect and communicate in the complex imaginary of the ex-Soviet space." [2] Tlostanova believes that the Soviet approach to creating "its own New Woman in her metropolitan and colonial versions" implied that "the gendered subjects of the ex-colonies of Russia and the USSR are not quite postcolonial and not entirely postsocialist." [3] However, this specificity, as well as "presocialist local genealogies of women's struggles and resistance, tend to be erased." [4]

Postcolonial theory becomes increasingly popular in the post-Soviet contexts as processes of decolonization continue in the former 'periphery' of the former USSR. However, postcolonial rhetoric entangled with the new dependencies of the ex-Soviet states might also reproduce colonial narratives [5] or become instrumentalized by ruling elites. The appropriation of postcolonial theory by national/ist elites stems from the wish to control gender relationships in society. This has been well-described by researchers from Central Asia [6], who focused on the post-Soviet transformation of the conceptualization of "womanhood." From the Soviet 'double burden' of work and care the idea of 'women' became 'traditionalized' or defined through the local interpretations of Islam. The literature on contemporary gender discourses in Central Asia demonstrates that women resist these changes through art [7], nongovernmental organization (NGO) work [8], activism [9] and academia. [10] Instead, (queer) feminists engage with the idea of decolonization in their own ways. Further attention paid to these practices of resistance from scholars would enrich the field of literature on post-Soviet feminisms, which often focuses on such visible cases as 'Femen' in Ukraine or 'Pussy Riot' in Russia [11] Developing this field of inquiry is crucial to challenge the 'attachment' of discourses on 'gender equality' to the 'West' and develop intersectional sensitivity among feminists from the former USSR.

Feminist discourses in the former USSR

Feminist discourse is never *a* discourse, but discourses influenced "by unequal power structures" [12] that make the movement constantly debate its own inclusivity. Feminist ideas may both develop alternatives to global hegemonies and reproduce existing inequalities in the condensing temporal economy of neoliberal academic capitalism. [13] Koobak and Marling, while writing about the countries of the former USSR, describe the self-perception of local feminists as shaped by the so-called "lag discourse." [14] As the "West's definition of progress includes gender equality, feminism in post-Soviet states is constructed as necessarily foreign to and rejected by local women." [15] The linkage of 'gender equality' with the 'West,' enhanced by its incorporation into the agenda of development institutions, NGOs and Western-style universities, results in the detachment of the agenda of these development institutions from the needs of local women and the 'NGOization' of activism. [16] It also helps to sustain the rhetoric of nationalist groups that accuse (queer) feminists of being 'Western' agents. [17]

Feminisms in different ex-Soviet countries today follow their own paths. However, common challenges remain. Racism and colonialism, for instance, were understood, similarly to in the USSR, as problems of the 'West' and the 'Third World,' and the ex-Soviet societies are only now beginning to find the language to discuss these topics. Intersectional, decolonial and antiracist (queer) feminists are some of the most significant contributors to the debates on decolonization and antiracism. Tlostanova [18] applied the concept of "imperial difference" to post-Soviet feminisms, showing that they are not only characterized by the "lag discourse" [19] in relation to the 'West,' but also have their own 'Others.' She drew attention to the blindness of ex-Soviet feminisms to race by referring to such formerly colonized parts of the USSR as Caucasus or Central Asia. Numerous authors today from the former periphery of the USSR [20] are discussing the challenges of theorizing feminism and decolonization in the countries of the former USSR. The goal of this study was to enrich their perspectives by looking at the understandings of feminism and decolonization in the feminist networks of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

Between two poles

My research took place in two cities which possess the vastest networks of (queer) feminist activists, artists and academics in the region – Bishkek and Almaty. I conducted over 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews during a research stay in 2019 to figure out the understandings of decolonization that circulate in the feminist communities of these two cities. The interviews centered on the positionings of activists, academics and artists regarding Russia and 'the West,' as well as their understandings of decolonization. I also attempted to understand the roots of these positions, and how they influence local formulations of feminism.

Interviewees from both cities have agreed that they feel themselves caught between two dependencies. As Altynai Kambekova describes it, after the dissolution of the USSR the region faced a "twofold" problem:

[…] on the one hand, the erasure of the voices, and therefore, the mere existence of the entire region, just because it could not be perceived as a separate entity outside of its former colonial center – Russia, and on the other, inevitable subjugation to larger neocolonial forces that came along with neoliberal Western capitalism. [21]

The legacy of the former Empire continues to have an impact on the lives of locals, many of whom experienced 'colonial' attitudes from 'Russian' activists. Zhanar Sekerbaeva [22] notes that while Kazakhstani activists know about everything that happens in Russia, Russians are generally unaware of the struggles of Central Asian feminists. Association of 'feminism,' 'queerness' and 'human rights' with the 'West' caused another problem – local activists were supposed to "internalize global norms." [23] Thus, it was crucial for local feminists to 'situate' or 'localize' feminism in their conditions to defend their independence and subjectivity. 'Situating' was, thus, synonymous with decolonizing. The ways of doing this included speaking about locally relevant issues, using local language, historical examples and traditional folklore. Some interviewees also expressed positions similar to those of African or Latin American feminists [24], describing as "decolonial" a "softer" version of feminism that includes alliances with men and appeals to the practices that might have existed before colonization. Others, however, found these forms of localization inappropriate and described them as examples of colonial thinking.

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan

The feminist communities of Bishkek and Almaty have different challenges although they are connected in many ways. The proliferation of women's rights and LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other possible sexual and gender identities) NGOs in post-independence Kyrgyzstan [25] precluded that many of the Kyrgyz feminists either work or have worked in one of these organizations. Feminist networks in Almaty are comprised mostly of grassroots activists and artists, apart from 'Feminita,' an NGO. Thus, most participants in Bishkek reflected on the impact of international institutions and NGOs on feminism and defined themselves as "less radical" in comparison to activists in Kazakhstan. Several respondents believed that while 'Western' discourses had a stronger impact on Kyrgyzstani feminists, in Kazakhstan, a stronger vector of influence was that of Russian feminists. This influence was named as a reason for the bigger popularity of radical feminism that opposes the legalization of sex work and any kind of pornography.

The relationship to the USSR was also different in the two countries. Most respondents in Kyrgyzstan believed that if the Russian Empire could be described as colonial, the USSR could not, because it contained not only

colonial but also emancipatory elements. For some, this position might have been informed by the activities of 'SHTAB' – an institution that existed in Bishkek from 2012 to 2016 and promoted so-called "queer communism." [26] In Kazakhstan, more interlocutors believed that both the Russian Empire and the USSR were colonizers. A possible reason for this, as one respondent mentioned, might have been the difference in the histories of the two countries, as a lot more people died in Kazakhstan during the Soviet times. The feminist community here seemed to be divided on the question of nationalism: while some saw the promotion of the Kazakh language and traditions as decolonization, for others, mostly non-Kazakhs, this appeared as nationalism.

The debates on decolonization within the Kazakhstani feminist movement were also influenced by Tlostanova's writings. [27] Some of my respondents believed that this influence resulted in decolonization being primarily associated with desovietization. Several interlocutors from both countries also mentioned a group of scholars and artists who identified as "decolonialists" and were in close conversation with Tlostanova's ideas. In both Bishkek and Almaty, as one of my interlocutors said, "feminism and decolonization were brought about by the same people, both at once" – thus, entangled and inseparable. However, they were rejecting feminist ideas as a colonial continuation of the Soviet discourse of saving "the women of the Orient." While feminists believed that such practices as the status of kelin [28] and kalym [29] can never be justified by references to tradition, decolonialists redefined them as having a positive significance. The goal of this was to return agency to rural women, whom feminist conceptualizations of gender equality positioned as 'oppressed.' Even though this echoed the wishes of feminist activists, some of them described the attitudes of "decolonialists" as revanchist and believed that they "devalue both feminism and decolonization."

In the end, for both "feminists" and "decolonialists" to decolonize meant to bridge the divide between representatives of urban and rural communities and set oneself free of "theoretical dogmatism" and "elitism." Though arguing with each other, both agreed that there is a "need to get rid of the image of 'the oppressed woman# that NGO workers have." As Davlabegim Mamadshoeva writes [30], when doing feminist research, one always has to shift and balance between feminist knowledge and the wish to influence someone, and respect for the world views of those with whom you work, even when they say something 'antifeminist.' A lot of my interlocutors believed that 'Western' colonialism was incompatible with that of the Russian/Soviet Empire, as the latter relied on actual violence. Nevertheless, the linkage of feminist agenda with Western-style universities and international institutions implied that the divide between rural and urban populations also led to the 'elitism' and classism of the feminist movement. Even though examples of some of my respondents proved that an academic background was not necessary for gaining access to a position in a feminist NGO, a queer feminist agenda was still mostly available only to those who knew English and had a university education. Those interlocutors who did not possess either told me that they got information about feminist theory from their friends and colleagues. However, even for that information, one would at least need to know Russian.

Queer feminist border thinking

Aware that being a feminist is also a privilege, my interlocutors reflected on the inclusivity of feminist discourses: "The problem of many of us is that we have read a lot of things in the books and feminism in our heads is in such a vacuum condition that all divergencies seem to be non-feminism." Those most aware of that were the ones who had experience of working in rural settings: "in the regions there is no feminism, there is no language in which it can be operationalized. When we try […] even intersectional feminists, no matter how critical you are – it all falls into pieces." In Bishkek and Almaty, they actively looked for ways to stop reproducing the image of 'saviors' that haunts the feminist movement. Decolonization was a tool that helped to make feminism more sensitive towards perspectives of the less privileged, moving the gaze 'from the center to the periphery.' In the words of one of my interlocutors, "We usually look at the center, not onto the margins. And here it is different – not imperial center, but colonized territories, not cities but villages." Another activist supposed that "maybe what we need is some kind of intersectionality inside of intersectionality – the fact that we are a postcolonial country does not mean that all women here are the same."

Though having the same impulse behind it, decolonization was framed differently by my interlocutors. Some believed it was synonymous with intersectionality. Others said that intersectionality was useless in the local

context without its "adaptation." For some, decolonial feminism was similar to Xenofeminism [31], "radically inclusive queer feminism concerned with not only non-women, but also non-humans." Others believed one had depart from 'Western' theorizing and look more into the local history, as Sekerbayeva [32] did with Kazakh tales. Paying more attention to the origin of ideas we sometimes took for granted was also recommended: "sometimes we can say that feminist theory has outlived itself, that queer theory is what we need now […] And no one goes to an archive to understand who was here before them." Most shared the opinion that it was necessary to look for ways of creating forms of situated solidarity across difference, and question and reframe their understandings of feminism so that they would benefit local women from all parts of the society, including those without higher education and knowledge of Russian and English. This suggests the possibility of bridging the divide between urban and rural communities and constructing "more symmetrical and dialogic relations between Western and non-Western cultures and epistemologies." [33]

The ways in which my interlocutors interpreted feminism were not dependent on the ideas from either 'Russia' or the 'West.' Instead, they were examples of critical "border thinking" [34], which brought 'globalized' feminist theories together with local practices, ideas and experiences that also come from those not familiar with any kind of theorizing. As Prokopenko writes, "to decolonize oneself is not to go back to something that existed before colonization. To decolonize (oneself, a place) is to engage in the non-hierarchical relationship with the universe as a unity of phenomena – of matter." [35] The approaches to feminism in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan involved unlearning hierarchies in all spheres of life and, thus, represented decolonial thinking and doing.

Wuthnow believes that "what is needed is a conceptualization of subjectivity that allows for notions of embodiment, location and history that avoid essentialism, thus legitimizing historicized and situated 'experience' as a ground for the production of knowledge and political action." [36] As a solution to the 'universalism' and 'elitism' of feminist theory, my interlocutors chose to act based on the concrete issue they needed to resolve – be it a discussion with 'Western' academics or a project with rural women. Instead of new generalizations, they adapted a "sharper focus on the complex singularities that constitute their respective locations." [37] The activists, scholars and artists I met in Bishkek and Almaty strive to achieve new solidarities and create "infrastructures of resistance" [38] – alliances based not on homogenous identity but on our locations within power structures. As "tricksters and border dwellers who switch codes and identities as a way to survive and resist" [39], they move between theories, dependencies and practical needs on the ground, exemplifying "critical intersectionality" – "a living practice that precedes yet calls for theorization while resisting ossification" and helps to express "oppositional gendered being, thinking, and agency across the transcultural and transepistemic pluriversal loci." [40]

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Notes:

[1] Madina Tlostanova, Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality, in: Journal of Postcolonial Writing 48 (2012) 2, pp. 130–142, here p. 130.

[2] Tlostanova Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? Here p. 142.

[3] Madina Tlostanova, Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories and Intersectional coalitions, in Baltic Worlds 1–2 (2015), pp. 38–43, here p. 40.

[4] Tlostanova, Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories, here p. 40.

[5] Alexnder Etkind, Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience, Cambridge: Polity Press 2003. This book was criticized for perpetuating aspects of the Russo-Soviet colonialism. Vitaliy Chernetsky, Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization, Montreal/London: McGill-Queen's University Press 2007, here pp. 206–208. In addition, "postsocialist postcolonialism" in general is criticized for its imbalanced focus on Russia, see Tamar Koplatadze, Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies, in: Postcolonial Studies 22 (2019) 4, pp. 469–489.

[6] Elena Kim, Re-feminizing the Post-Soviet Women: Identity, Politics and Virginity Ceremonies in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan, in: Journal of Gender Studies 29 (2020) 6, pp. 706–716; Mehrangiz Najafizadeh/Linda Lindsey (eds.), Women of Asia. Globalization, Development, and Gender Equity, London/New York: Routledge 2019; Svetlana Shakirova, Zhenshchiny.SU – Zhenshchiny. KZ: Osobennosti Perekhoda, in: Sophia V. Kasymova (ed.), Gender: Tradit͡sii i Sovremennost', Dushanbe: Shkola Gendernogo Obrazovanii͡a 2005, pp. 92–135.

[7] Diana T. Kudaibergenova, Between the State and the Artist: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in the Formation of Ideas of the Nation in Central Asia, in: Nationalities Papers 44 (2005) 2, pp. 225–246.

[8] Elena Kim et al., Making the 'Empowered Woman': Exploring Contradictions in Gender and Development Programming in Kyrgyzstan, in: Central Asian Survey 37 (2018) 2, pp. 228–246.

[9] Zhanar Sekerbayeva, Queer Activism in Contemporary Kazakhstan, in: Perekrestki 1–2 (2017), pp. 138–151; Syinat Sultanalieva, Escaping the Dichotomies of 'Good' and 'Bad': Chronotopes of Queerness in Kyrgyzstan, in: Emily Channell-Justice (ed.), Decolonizing Queer Experience. LGBT+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Lanham: Rowman and Littefield 2020, pp. 55–72.

[10] Diana T. Kudaibergenova et al., When Your Field Is Also Your Home: Introducing Feminist Subjectivities in Central Asia, Open Democracy, October 7, 2019, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/when-your-field-also-your-home-introducing-feminist-subjectivities-central-asia (accessed July 1, 2022).

[11] See, for instance, Emily Channell, Is Sextremism the New Feminism? Perspectives from Pussy Riot and Femen, in: Nationalities Papers 42 (2014) 4, pp. 611–614; Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin's Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality, in: Nationalities Papers 42 (2014) 4, pp. 615–621; Valerie Sperling, Russian Feminist Perspectives on Pussy Riot, in: Nationalities Papers 42 (2014) 4, pp. 591–603; Marina Yusupova, Pussy Riot: A Feminist Band Lost in History and Translation, in: Nationalities Papers 42 (2014) 4, pp. 604–610; Katharina Wiedlack, Lost in Translation? Pussy Riot Solidarity Activism and the Danger of Perpetuating North/Western Hegemonies, in: Religion and Gender 4 (2014) 2, pp. 145–165; Elizabeth Groeneveld, Are We All Pussy Riot? On Narratives of Feminist Return and the Limits of Transnational Solidarity, in: Feminist Theory 16 (2015) 3, pp. 289–307; Elena Gapova, Becoming Visible in The Digital Age, in: Feminist Media Studies 15 (2015) 1, pp. 18–35.

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Feminism, and Women's Nongovernmental Organizations in Post-socialist Eastern Europe, in: Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society (2004), pp. 727–753; Kim, Elena et al., Making the 'Empowered Woman.'

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[19] Koobak/Marling, The Decolonial Challenge, here p. 332.

[20] Mariam Agamyan, Shcho novogo v moemu ri͡ukzaku, in: Feminist Critique, 2018, https://feminist.krytyka.com/ua/articles/shcho-novoho-v-moiemu-ryukzaku (accessed July 1, 2022); Altynay Kambekova, Stuck between the Past and the Present: Coloniality of Queer Activism in Central Asia, n: Feminist Translocalities, 2020, https://feminisms.co/zine/colonialism-queer-central-asia (accessed July 1, 2022); Kudaibergenova, When Your Field; Maria Mayerchyk/Olga Plakhotnik. Between Time of Nation and Feminist Time: Genealogies of Feminist Protest in Ukraine, in: Annette Bühler-Dietrich (ed.), Feminist Circulations between East and West/Feministische Zirkulationen zwischen Ost und West, Berlin: Frank & Timme 2019, pp. 47–70; Lesia Pagulich/Tatsiana Shchurko. (Re)thinking Postsocialism: Interview with Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, in: Feminist Critique 3 (2020), pp. 91–111.

[21] Kambekova, Stuck between the Past.

[22] Kudaibergenova, When Your Field.

[23] Irina Liczek/Jens Wandel, Internalization of Universal Norms. A Study of Gender Equality in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, in: Amanda E. Wooden/Christoph H. Stefes (eds.), The Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus, New York: Routledge 2009, pp. 205–225.

[24] Deirdre Byrne, Decolonial African Feminism for White Allies, in: Journal of International Women's Studies 21 (2020), pp. 37–46.

[25] Hoare, Doing Gender Activism, here p. 282.

[26] Shtab, Manifest kvir-kommunizma. Art-initiatives.org, 2013.

[27] Tlostanova, Gender Epistemologies.

[28] A newly wed daughter-in-law who has to do an enormous amount of unpaid labor, obeying her husband's mother.

[29] The tradition of paying the family of the bride.

[30] Kudaibergenova, When Your Field.

[31] Laboria Cuboniks, Xenofeminist Manifesto, 2015, https://www.laboriacuboniks.net/#zero (accessed July 1, 2022).

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[34] Madina Tlostanova/Suruchi Thapar-Björkert/Redi Koobak, Border Thinking and Disidentification: Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues, in: Feminist Theory 17 (2016) 2, pp. 211–128.

[35] Lesia Prokopenko, Exit from the Colony. Farewell to the Empire, in: Intermodal Terminal, 2019, https://intermodalterminal.info/exit-colony-eng// (accessed February 10, 2020).

[36] Julia Wuthnow, Deleuze in the Postcolonial. On Nomads and Indigenous Politics, in: Feminist Theory 3 (2020) 2, pp. 183–200, here p. 194.

[37] Rosi Braidotti, The Critical Posthumanities; or, Is Medianatures to Naturecultures as Zoe Is to Bios? Cultural Politics an International Journal 12 (2016) 3, pp. 380–390, here p. 387.

[38] Anna Engelhardt/Sasha Shestakova, Bol'shie krany dai͡ut nam bol'shie preimushchestva, Syg.ma, December 17, 2019, https://syg.ma/@anna-engelhardt/bolshiie-krany-daiut-nam-bolshiie-prieimushchiestva-1 (accessed July 1, 2022).

[39] Tlostanova, Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories, here p. 41.

[40] Tlostanova, Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories, here p. 42.

09

The Time of Jokes in the Rubble of Post-communism

Neda Genova, University of Warwick

This contribution appraises the political potentiality of humor as a means to disrupt a post-communist temporal order. I depart methodologically from a specific instance of a humorous intervention in public space in Sofia as a starting point for the examination of this potentiality in theoretical terms. In the essay, I discuss resonances and differences between conceptualizations of postcolonial and post-communist temporality, and engage with the writings of Boris Buden (2009), Nikolay Karkov and Zhivka Valiavicharska (2018), and Alenka Zupančič (2008). In the final part of the text, Zupančič's work is mobilized in order to shed light on two interrelated aspects regarding humor's subversive potential: firstly, its capacity to intervene in a temporal order and, secondly, its ability to render abstractions concrete. I end the contribution with a speculative proposition about the role of humor in the collapse of post-communism.

The Time of Jokes in the Rubble of Post-communism

Neda Genova, University of Warwick

On an unseasonably warm evening in March 2019, amidst a series of reconstruction works on one of Sofia's busiest central streets – Graf Ignatiev (better known as "Grafa") – a group of friends decided to gather on the pavement for a small beach party. They declared the piles of rubbish, mortar and sand left on the pedestrian sidewalk to be a "sand dune," brought along their beachwear, portable loudspeakers and chairs, their inflatable toys and flip-flops, to mockingly celebrate Sofia municipality's "gift" to its residents. The 'beach-goers' when speaking to a media outlet, which took an interest in the bizarre action, laughingly describe the impossibility of walking the streets of the city. They point at a dangerous crossing just behind their "beach" and speculate the possibility of a concessionaire taking over their slot and requiring payment per deckchair – or even deciding to build "one or two hotels" just next to them. In exasperation, they declare that they no longer hope for the street's reconstruction to be "nice," but "simply want it to end." [1]

Their discourse mixes humor with tropes that are ever so familiar to residents of Sofia in relation to never-ending reconstruction works, which are done with little more in mind than the need to quickly spend funds. Accessibility and durability of the infrastructure, its aesthetic outlook, the need for democratic participation in decision-making or to make investments beyond the city center are rarely a priority in these hastily executed refurbishments. Instead, there is piling evidence for fraudulence with public money and European Union funds on behalf of subcontracted companies, which are hired to reconstruct 'emblematic' central sites, but seldom such in peripheral and poorer areas. Owners of G.P. Group [2], the company that was tasked with the refurbishment of "Grafa," for example, have been persecuted for money laundering and tax evasion. During its contested refurbishment, an anti-corruption protest was staged in front of the municipality, petitions and critical journalistic articles were written, while photographic evidence of poorly executed work was repeatedly posted on social media, making for cycles of indignation and ridicule. Indeed, the parodic instantiation of the beach party can be considered in relation to a longer succession of humorous enunciations that target a number of public infrastructure works recently executed in Sofia. A proliferation of Internet memes and humorous collages has accompanied the reconstruction of "Grafa." These memes tend to operate by way of abstracting an element or set of elements from the urban environment and reworking them in a humorous way, at times literally filling the visible gaps and cracks of pavements and sidewalks with clown faces or other fictional characters. When new and remarkably sharp-edged street dividers were installed along "Grafa" in the winter of 2018, for instance, these were quickly dubbed "shark-fins" and integrated into memes that reimagined the street as a marine landscape. Around the same time, bird-eye snapshots of the new and – as some citizens described them on social media – 'psychedelic' tiles on an adjacent square were made over as the background of a Super Mario game.

To come back to the episode with which I choose to start this piece, we could ask: What is the modality of its critique? How does the adoption of a humorous attitude vis-à-vis flawed public infrastructure works differ from an anti-corruption discourse that would be equally available as an entry point to such situations? It can be ascertained that the humorous action mentioned above is discursively instable – the city center beachgoers do not articulate one clear 'message,' but instead mix parody and cri-

tique, self-irony and playfulness. Can this action then be described as a 'political' one? And, if so, what are the stakes in such a description, particularly in the context of processes and forces governing Bulgarian post-communist society?

In this brief contribution, I will tackle this question from the point of view of humor's potential to function as a social and political force. I will aim to show through the works of Alenka Zupančič [3], Boris Buden [4] and scholars working within postcolonial theory that the critical potential of humor in the post-communist context can best be understood from the perspective of its capacity to disrupt a temporal order [5] of historical belatedness and render concrete universals, such as 'corruption.'

Postcolonial and Post-communist Times

My contention is that post-communist temporality is a potent political construction whose profound governing effects can be discerned in what Boris Buden (2009) has described as a logic of historical belatedness. The political productivity of time and its produced character have been subject of a long-lasting interest in continental philosophy and critical theory. Henri Bergson [6] distinguishes between the experience of real duration and the mathematical division into temporal units (the subjugation of an experience of time to space), whereas with Alfred North Whitehead we could describe both space and time as powerful abstractions. [7] Michel Foucault's study of the emergence of the prison system in modern Europe [8] has shown how the imposition of an economy of time – through the increased importance of timetabling alongside the fragmentation of body movements and daily routines – has become an important part of the emergence of disciplinary mechanisms and their coupling with an ever-intensifying industrial production.

Time as a political operator also has an important role to play in postcolonial scholarship: scholars, such as Edward Said, have argued that the othering of the "Orient" depends on the relegation of vast territories and populations to a position of historical and cultural backwardness [9] In the words of Anabel Quijano, writing at the turn of the century from an explicitly decolonial perspective: "[T]he relations between European and non-European suffered a *temporal alteration:* all non-Europe belonged to the past, and so it was possible to think about relations between them in an evolutionary perspective." [10] The construction of such an evolutionary perspective serves to support a racializing matrix that legitimizes the exploitation of labor, natural resources and divergent knowledges about the world. Europe – a territory which is as imaginary as the "Orient" and the "non-European" – is constructed in this power relationship as civilized, modern and future-bound, showing the way for progress in an economic, cultural, scientific and moral sense alike. Its superior position, however, always depends on a relationship to what is 'othered', that is, posited as in need of development, correction and study, relegated to not only another space but also another time: one that is past.

Drawing nearer to the site of the present examination, we might ask what a bringing together of postcolonial and post-communist frames of analysis can add to the discussion of time as a governing mechanism. Nikolai Karkov and Zhivka Valiavicharska have described the productivity of juxtaposing postcolonial and post-socialist perspectives as one that results in a "surplus of vision." [11] Both the postcolonial and the post-communist indicate a *temporal relation* – signaled by the use of the prefix 'post' in conjunction to the two different sociopolitical conditions. In postcolonial theory, it is common to assert that the 'post' does not place us at a time that is 'beyond' or 'after' colonialism [12]; post-communist studies preoccupy themselves with both the historical conditions and the ex-communist societies and processes shaping them. Ranabir Samaddar, writing about the 'post' in postcolonialism, asks: "What time does the 'post' indicate? and what is the condition in which the time designated as the 'post' congeal itself?" [13] He asserts that he uses the term "post-colonial" strategically as *"a condition, an age* – global, yet local in many ways – and as a *predicament,* an age that speaks of a condition with its contradictions, a site of new struggles, contradictory possibilities, and new transformations." [14] Samaddar, furthermore, suggests that this condition "includes not only a certain imagination of space, it also indicates a certain notion of time." [15]

The issue of time and temporality is central to both the postcolonial and the post-communist conditions, albeit differently. As asserted by Samaddar, anti-colonial revolutions could be seen as "interruptions in bourgeois presentation of time" [16]: if time is precisely what is to be rendered homogenous under capitalism, then uprisings challenge its order and introduce a rupture, an opening, the possibility of a different kind of temporal order and relation to the future. In post-communism, however, we could say that a homogeneous capitalist time is imposed

even more forcibly. There, 'communism' is itself presented as an interruption of the proper course of history and development, thus, retroactively being vested with the status of an error or deviation from the point of view of a present that needs to be constantly purged from it and smoothened. As Boris Buden has shown in his work, a chief strategy in this homogenizing operation is the imposition of a temporal and political logic of belatedness [17] The governing implications for the populations and territories targeted by it are far-reaching: similarly to ex-colonial countries, ex-communist societies are also presented as occupying another time vis-à-vis the West. They hence need to perpetually 'catch up' with an always out of reach Western modernity: by adopting neoliberal economic policies; by implementing reforms in education and culture (often predicated upon the historical erasure of the experience of socialism); and by developing a language and understanding of democracy and politics that are aligned with liberal democratic values strictly after a Western model. In his analysis of the emergence of the metaphor of the "child" post-1989, Buden (2009) has demonstrated how an infantilizing discourse applied to post-communist societies has contributed to the stabilization of a hegemonic temporal and political order.

Accepting and perpetuating the developmentalist, orientalizing and othering discourse of colonizers has produced deep-seated effects in ex-colonial states, but so has the acceptance of the logic of belatedness for ex-communist societies. The subtitle of Buden's book, "the end of post-communism" (2009), can, thus, be read as an appeal to break with attempts to align discursively and politically with that logic as well as with its violently infantilizing and governing effects.

What could such putting an "end" to post-communism look like? Discourse that takes a critical stance towards the stifling, violent logics of post-communism's governing regime often adopts the exposure of faults as its working mode, a modality of revealing and unmasking. What I would like to pursue instead in the remaining part of this contribution is the exploration of the potential of humor to act as a social force capable of disrupting post-communist temporality. This examination is undertaken in the conviction that, rather than being discarded in advance as apolitical, the subversive modality of humor can indeed open up intellectually and politically invigorating ways of understanding and intervening in post-communist sociality.

Laughter and Comedy in the Times of Post-communism

In his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic,* written in the year 1900, Henri Bergson offers a peculiar account of the force of humor. He states at the onset that humor and laughter derive their force from their social character and for implying "complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary." [18] The main way in which he frames the comical is through the experience of something "rigid" [19] or "mechanical" [20] in what is supposed to be in constant flux and change – that is, in life itself. In his theoretical construction, comic impression is created through automatic or monotonous repetitions; through the realization of the artificiality of certain customs (like clothing or ceremonies); or when confronted with the imitability of people. In short, according to Bergson, we find "something mechanical in something living" in all laughable objects [21] Laughter itself then functions as a social corrective by "convert[ing] rigidity into plasticity" [22] and, thus, ultimately serving "life" as that which is a "continuous evolution" in time and a coexistence of "perfect," inimitable, non-repeating individualities in space. [23] What I would like to take from Bergson at this point is the insistence on humor's social function. In a way, we could say that parody and comedy not only imply a preexisting community of laughers, but they also enact and create such communities.

Alenka Zupančič has offered a rich and complex reading of Bergson's essay in her book *The Odd One In*. [24] However, her understanding of "life" is quite different from that of Bergson – writing from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, she is wary of opposing it to repetition or mechanism. Indeed, she warns against positing "life" as something self-contained, self-identical or transcendental (as Bergson's vitalist position appears to do), but instead asserts its immanent emergence in the gap opened by repetition itself. [25] Furthermore, instead of conceiving of the comical as what needs to be "corrected" by laughter's social function, she sheds light on comedy's subversive potential itself.

Two of the interrelated aspects of comedy discussed by Zupančič seem to be especially pertinent to an understanding of the force of humor on the terrain of post-communism: comedy's capacity to revert the "abstract" into a "concrete" and also to intervene into a temporal order, disturbing an allegedly natural sequence of "demand" and "satisfaction."

In relation to the first aspect and drawing substantially on Hegel, Zupančič writes that comedy does away with attempts to *represent* essences, abstractions or universals – they are instead rendered physical and concrete. The relationship of the self to these universals is inverted because what happens is that abstractions themselves become subjects in the comic act. They are no longer self-identical or forming a seemingly unshakable basis of existence, but appear as concrete and, hence, fraught, fallible, even silly: "the universal itself is precisely as idiotic as its concrete and individual appearance." [26] In the case of our urban beach party, staged amidst rubble and sand in Sofia, it is not that the beachgoers attempt to "represent" corruption or institutional power. Instead, the latter's idiocy and arbitrariness is what is rendered concrete when they enter the comic scene through the protagonists. The beachgoers reenact the absurdity of municipal decision-making processes and the dominant entrepreneurial logic in a parodic and hyperbolic manner. This occurs, for instance, when the beachgoers hypothesize that they will soon have to pay for deckchairs, surrounded by newly built hotels and beach bars due to the attractiveness of their centrally located beach. The consensual character of universally accepted 'truths' of Bulgarian post-communism – such as its corrupt character, the lack of accountability and transparency, the disregard for people's livelihoods, its market-driven logic – is turned upside down. However, this inversion is not achieved by passing a critical verdict on the faults of these alleged 'truths and universals' or by framing them otherwise as unjust, but rather by comically inhabiting and, thus, prying them open for ridicule, which, in turn, exposes their arbitrary and contingent character.

Secondly, according to Zupančič, comedy's subversive potential can also be discerned in the way it intervenes in a temporal order. Rather than placing the subject in a position where it addresses a never quite satisfiable demand to the Other (as is the case with tragedy), in comedy, the subject is traversed by an unexpected supplement, by a joyful surprise which instantiates the comic sequence. [27] As with love, in comedy too, the surplus always emerges elsewhere and at another time, [28] rather than functioning according to a logic of a satisfiable demand or an ideal of complementarity. Hence, when we laugh, we do so not simply at the content of jokes but also at the "dimension of precariousness and fundamental uncertainty […] that gets articulated and becomes manifest in every joke." [29]

Two points are intriguing here from the point of view of our concern with post-communist time and its logic of belatedness. Firstly, when we laugh, the radically unstable and arbitrary character of the present order of things – including its governing universals – is made palpable. The temporal disjunction, introduced by the moment of surprise of the joke that renders concrete some of these universals, is one that pierces through, however briefly, the post-communist temporal continuum. Vis-à-vis the beach party in Sofia, we can say that its participants no longer address their demands to any higher power (for instance, by demanding that the refurbishment is done 'nicely,' transparently or properly); neither do they reproduce one of the grand post-communist narratives (for instance, that of corruption, residual and deficient communist mentality, or of a deferred modernity). The comic situation at hand is one that, instead of perpetuating a claim of belatedness or reproducing preexisting axes of critique, creates its own coordinates and, thus, fundamentally destabilizes any claim of a 'natural' order or sequence.

This leads us to the second point that can be made with Zupančič in relation to time and comedy in post-communism. In her discussion of the temporality of the joke and comedy, she shows that while the joke is instantaneous and works in a relatively delimited moment marked by surprise, comedy stretches in time. [30] What is even more interesting is the relationship between both. Indeed, we can define the "art of comedy" as "a singular continuity-through-interruption, a continuity that […] builds with – and is built through – interruptions and breaks." [31] Each new joking reference to a part or aspect of the urban and social environment that enters the comic situation not only introduces a moment of joyful surprise and laughter but also partakes in the construction and creation of new coordinates. These stand at odds with what is posited as the 'given reality' built by a corrupt and incompetent municipal or state power. Grafa's new street dividers (a.k.a. the "sharks"), the tram, the sand dune, the maze of daily changing routes amidst the construction site, the imaginary concessionaire, the bar owner or the ticket-seller are not completely materially and semiotically uncoupled from their embeddedness in other, 'external,' frames of reference. However, the way they enter the time and space of the comic situation and how they are narratively made to work according to its humorous logic, bestows them – and through them, the comic sequence as

well as the whole terrain in which it is itself situated – a dimension of absurdity, arbitrariness and contingency.

This is also where humor's subversive character comes to the fore particularly strongly: by rendering seemingly immutable and universally accepted 'truths' concrete and frail; by interrupting a post-communist and colonial temporal logic of lagging behind; by introducing alternative spatiotemporal coordinates and frames of reference that make the hegemonic ones appear at least as arbitrary and silly as their comic iterations. We can, thus, assert that the end of post-communism will come not with the achievement of a final overlap between Bulgarian and Western modernity, or with the definite purging of the country's present from the ghost of communism that perpetually haunts it. Rather, its arrival will be driven by the implementation of more tools to decenter and divert it. Instead of discarding them in advance as apolitical, humor and comedy can contribute to the upending of the time of post-communism.

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Notes:

[1] Nova TV, Syhbudi Se, March 9, 2019, https://play.nova.bg/video/sybudi-se/season-6/sybudi-se-2019-03-09 (accessed March 8, 2021).

[2] This company has won numerous competitions for the construction of over 120 petrol stations for Lukoil, several metro stations for Sofia's subway company, and contests for large road infrastructures. It was also involved in a previous case of high-profile reconstruction works of Sofia's city center – namely the refurbishment of the park surrounding the National Palace of Culture that gathered significant public attention ahead of Bulgaria's assumption of the Presidency of the Council of EU. Founded in 2005, G.P. Group is also operating in other Balkan countries such as North Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia.

[3] Alenka Zupančič, The Odd One In. On Comedy, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London 2008.

[4] Boris Buden, Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus [Zone of Transition. On the End of Post-communism], Frankfurt am Main 2009.

[5] An analysis of the spatial disjunctions and continuities (together with their specific urban and geographical manifestations) would be indispensable for any research into post-communist sociality, particularly in the context of conflicts and negotiations of public space and infrastructure. However, for the purposes of the present intervention, I am deliberately narrowing my analysis to examine the governing mechanisms of time in post-communism and the political productivity of a temporal disruption in this context.

[6] Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution, Mineola, NY 1998.

[7] Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World. Lowell Lectures from 1925, New York 1948.

[8] Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison, New York 1995.

[9] Edward Said, Orientalism, London 2003.

[10] Anibal Quijano, Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America, in: International Sociology 15 (2000), pp. 215–232, here p. 221; emphasis mine.

[11] Nikolay Karkov/Zhivka Valiavicharska, Rethinking East-European Socialism: Notes Towards an Anti-Capitalist Decolonial Methodology, in: Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies 20 (2018), pp. 1–29, here p. 25. Karkov and Valiavicharska insist on the necessity of taking a critical stance towards accounts that posit the legitimacy of such a bringing together of analytical frameworks upon the presupposition of "structural homologies between postcolonial and postsocialist spaces" (p. 4). They point out how such an assumption replicates Cold War tropes but also erases the "political contributions of the socialist countries in fighting colonial power" (p. 19).

[12] The emergence of decolonial theory attempts to address the question of present-day colonial continuities of oppression while introducing a (partial) rupture to an older generation of postcolonial thinkers. The brevity of this contribution does not allow me to go into much detail regarding these debates, nor can I elaborate sufficiently here on the reasons why I decided to stick with "post-communist" (instead of "post-socialist") and with a hyphenated use of the terms. While the hyphen is used to highlight the composite character of these conditions and retain a certain openness in the tenuous negotiation of the relation between past, present and future, the insistence on "post-communism" as a category stems from the politically situated wish of maintaining the ambiguity and potentiality of communism as a transformative project in and for the present.

[13] Ranabir Samaddar, Karl Marx and the Postcolonial Age, London 2018, here p. 18. I would like to thank Raia Apostolova for directing me to the work of Samaddar.

[14] Samaddar, Karl Marx and the Postcolonial Age, p. 19.

[15] Samaddar, Karl Marx and the Postcolonial Age, p. 17.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Buden, Zone des Übergangs.

[18] Henri Bergson, Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, Washington 2008, here p. 7.

[19] Bergson, Laughter, p. 14.

[20] Bergson, Laughter, p. 17.

[21] Bergson, Laughter, p. 39.

[22] Bergson, Laughter, p. 84.

[23] Bergson, Laughter, p. 44–45.

[24] Zupančič, The Odd One In, pp. 111–126.

[25] Zupančič, The Odd One In, p. 118, 126.

[26] Zupančič, The Odd One In, p. 38.

[27] Zupančič, The Odd One In, p. 131.

[28] Zupančič, The Odd One In, p. 132, 134.

[29] Zupančič, The Odd One In, p. 142.

[30] Zupančič, The Odd One In, p. 136.

[31] Zupančič, The Odd One In, p. 140.

10 “The Magic Closet and the Dream Machine”: Post-Soviet Queer Knowledge Production in Times of increased Trans- and Homophobia

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We present our art-based research methodology called “The Dream Machine” that aims at analyzing queer lives in different post-Soviet locations by offering safer ways of creating evidence of queer forms of existence. We argue that a new research methodology that draws on art practices rather than on more conventional methods of academic research became crucial due to the increase in homo- and transphobic violence in post-Soviet regions, and the surge in precariousness that LGBTIQAP+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual, Pansexual, and other) visibility creates. Building on the decolonial theorist Éduard Glissant’s concept of opacity, our project aims at recognizing queer lives across the post-Soviet spaces without reproducing the epistemic violence of the Western academic discourses on queerness. Drawing from art-based research methodologies and refusing research that demands pain narratives, we create, in conjunction with local queer communities, spaces of resistance, where queer lives can enjoy (relative) safety, build connections to each other and imagine better futures together. Moreover, we reappropriate the concept of the gay closet as a positively connoted magic closet – an open-access digital archive of traces, that recognizes the queer lives in post-Soviet spaces but does not endanger them.

"The Magic Closet and the Dream Machine": Post-Soviet Queer Knowledge Production in Times of increased Trans- and Homophobia

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Introduction

In this paper, we present our art-based research methodology called "The Dream Machine" that aims at analyzing and supporting queer lives in different post-Soviet locations by offering safer ways of creating and archiving evidence of various queer forms of existence. We argue that the development of a new research methodology that draws on art practices and approaches rather than on more conventional tools and methods of academic research became crucial during the last decade due to the increase in homo- and transphobic violence in post-Soviet regions and the surge in precariousness that LGBTIQAP+ visibility and transparency create.

We come from different post-Soviet and Western spaces, such as Kazakhstan, Russia and Austria, and various backgrounds, such as queer-feminist activism, research, performance and experimental film, and, thus, analyze the situation from different perspectives. Positioning ourselves as a team of artists and researchers between the so-called West and the post-Soviet space, we are well aware of the paradoxical situation that the post-Soviet condition in transnational academic [2] and other solidarity alliances poses for queer lives. On the one hand, the international solidarity offers resources for researching, sustaining and distributing knowledge of queer lives in the regions – a knowledge that is threatened to become even more marginal and unknown through laws and other forms of violence as much as simply through the lack of resources. On the other hand, such solidarity efforts, especially within the area of research, follow mostly what we call a visibility paradigm. Within the latter, coming out and being visible are understood as progressive modes of queer living, while being closeted or invisible are seen as shameful. Thus, the paradigm overlooks the opaque ways of resisting homophobic oppression and reinforces the Western hegemonic discourses about queerness and queer identity politics.

Building on the decolonial theorist and philosopher Éduard Glissant's concept of opacity [3], our project aims at recognizing and supporting queer lives across the post-Soviet spaces without endangering them or reproducing the epistemic violence of the Western academic discourses on queerness.

Drawing on art-based research methodologies and refusing research that demands pain narratives [4], we create, in conjunction with local queer communities, spaces of resistance, where queer lives can enjoy (relative) safety and people can build connections to each other and imagine better futures together. Using the methodology of the Dream Machine, a kinetic flicker device, we create spaces where anyone can focus on their lives, feelings and dreams, subsequently transforming their experiences into different artistic forms from texts to videos and from drawings to performances. Moreover, we reappropriate the concept of the *gay closet* [5] as a positively connoted *magic closet* – an open-access digital archive of traces that emerged during the Dream Machine sessions that recognizes the queer lives in post-Soviet spaces but does not endanger them or make them vulnerable.

We start this article by discussing our research terminology and arguing why it is applicable in the context of post-Soviet spaces. Thereafter, we contextualize our research, giving a brief overview of the recent sociopolitical challenges that queer lives in post-Soviet spaces are facing and arguing that art-based research methods are a promising approach in this particular context. We next describe the development of our own Dream Machine methodology: summarizing the critical scholarly work on visibility on which we can build, introducing the concept of opacity and its application, and, finally, describing the Dream Machine methodology in detail.

Terminology: Queer Lives, Traces and Moving away from the Western Paradigms

The LGBT and queer communities throughout post-Soviet countries are heatedly discussing strategies, community-building processes, local specifics and terminology (see the "Kvir ili ne kvir?" online discussion by KX online for the most recent examples [6]). Some of the groups use the term 'queer' strategically. Due to the difficulties of transferring this term to post-Soviet spaces, since it has no meaning in local languages [7] – as distinct from the term gay or the abbreviation LGBT(IQAP+) – it paradoxically allows for a certain safety because 'queer' does not evoke immediate negative responses within mainstream discourses and is still understandable to those who want to engage with LGBT-related topics. [8]

In order to understand post-Soviet queerness, we need to consider its numerous aspects: complex colonization and liberation histories, different for each of the post-Soviet spaces; a very recent usage of the term 'queer' in the languages; homo- and transphobia as part of new national ideologies; and unique Soviet class formation and ethnic/race histories. Thus, we use queer in our research rather than LGBTIQAP+ as an operational term encompassing manifold social exclusions, some of which may not line up with the conventional definitions of LGBTIQAP+ or the term queer used in (other) English-speaking contexts. Additionally, we use the terms квир, квір and kvir: the first two being the Russian and Ukrainian translations of queer and the latter the transliteration of these translations back into English. We aim to disrupt the Western hegemony of knowledge production and redefining what queer means and which modes of living it encompasses by using these alternative terms. The use of queer seems especially productive within artistic spaces in post-Soviet countries. Art spaces have generally been providing relative safety for nonheterosexual lives and communities, whereas pressure on activists and academic circles has been increasing in the last few years. [9]

We use the concept of post-Soviet 'queer lives' rather than queer people to avoid assuming that our Western terminology is applicable to what people do and experience and forcing any identities on our collaborators. They do not have to identify as queer or any of the LGBTIQAP+ acronyms since these identities and terms come from the Western context of knowledge production and can be seen by some as restrictive or make them vulnerable to the increasing homo- and transphobic violence. Instead of restricting our potential collaborators to the ones who identify as queer, we invite people who are interested in building new queer relationships, bonds and kinships.

By working with the concept of the queer 'trace' rather than trying to capture particular representations of post-Soviet queerness, we are also attempting to move away from the binary of presence and absence, as suggested by José Muñoz [10], and to question the assumption that visual (non-victimizing) representation of queer bodies equates to some form of emancipatory politics. We call the pieces that will be produced by local community members during the workshops 'queer traces' to avoid the violent reductionism and exposure of factual and representational data, as anti-elitist questioning of what counts as art, and as a decolonial and collaborational questioning of the creation of exotic artefacts.

Setting the Context: What is post-Soviet Space for Queer People?

The rise in homo- and transphobia in post-Soviet spaces is well-documented and analyzed by both internal [11] and external research. [12] Political activists' spaces are increasingly threatened through the various legislations aimed at banning LGBT 'propaganda' aimed at minors (enacted in Russia), protecting 'the traditional family model' (introduced in Lithuania) and similar laws proposed in Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Moldova, Poland and Ukraine. [13] Moreover, LGBTIQAP+ activists are pressured through foreign agent laws targeting organizations (Russia) or public violence and police brutality (Azerbaijan, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine). Male homosexuality remains criminalized in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Mass prosecutions of gay people (officially not state-sanctioned or connected to any legislation) in Chechnya, Russia, received wide publicity and solidarity actions worldwide in 2017. [14] The constitution amendments introduced in Russia in 2020 included defining marriage as a union of a man and a woman; soon after the introduction, a new law was proposed that prohibits marriage for transgender people and makes it impossible for them to change gender markers in their documents. [15]

Scholarly research on post-Soviet queer lives gives important insights into rising homo- and transphobia, and increasing difficulties for queer individuals. [16] Yet, it often overlooks art, theater and performance as spaces where queer life enjoys relatively free expression. The question of how post-Soviet queer lives exist and resist the pressure – in arts, culture and everyday lives – remains largely unaddressed. Moreover, the existing research emphasizes the importance of community, visibility and public articulations of queerness, and sexual and gender nonconformity. [17] By contrast, the process of queer community building in the context of state-imposed homophobia, social silencing, and lack of resources and recognition remains under-researched. [18]

The Visibility Paradigm, Queer Theory/Activism and the Researcher

Queer activism and queer theory, due to their emergence within the Anglophone context, operate within the framework of Western Enlightenment, progress, and capitalism, even when focusing on people outside the West. With a few exceptions [19], queer theory, thus, follows a logic that the feminist philosopher and critical race theorist Linda Martín Alcoff has termed "excessively materialist," and which stipulates that "only what is visible can generally achieve the status of accepted truth." [20]

Thinking less about queerness than gendered and racial representation and their function to create positive social change, Martín Alcoff points out that "[s]ecular, commodity-driven society is […] dominated by the realm of the visible, which dominates not only knowledge but also the expression and mobilization of desire and all sorts of social practices as well." [21] Visibility is a factor that makes identities intelligible to individuals themselves and the world, and a factor to create relationality among people who practice nonnormative sexualities or identify with nonnormative genders. In many contexts, especially Western and urban ones, the creation of visibility has been an appropriate means to create change.

While commodity-oriented societies demand visibility as a precondition for recognition, legitimation and truth, the affirmation of or compliance with this demand is not necessarily or always a liberating, positive and fulfilling one. We relate Martín Alcoff's analysis of the demand of visibility to Michel Foucault's work on the intrinsic connection between modern Western ideas about truth, and the confession and admission of sexual desires and pleasures. Foucault argues that what he calls "sexual interdictions" [22] are subjected to the power and control of modern Western institutions, such as medical systems and the state, as well as broader societal discourses. Moreover, the demand and mechanisms of truth production have become internalized by the individuals themselves, who subject themselves to "the obligation to tell the truth about oneself." [23] In other words, the subject can only constitute itself as truthful to itself if it has become transparent towards power. Foucault traces the technologies of Self-production, its relationship to surveillance and control, showing the violence of modern knowledge production towards any individual and especially those with nonnormative sexual desires. Yet, he does not offer an alternative way to imagine the Self as truthful and intelligible other than through processes of confession or what we call transparency and visibility, which, in turn, allows institutionalized power to exercise violence against the same Selves.

Glissant equally addresses the demand for transparency and visibility and its violence, although from a very different perspective than Foucault. Glissant is not concerned with sexual difference, sexual desires or identi-

ties but with issues of racialized and cultural differences and processes of social acceptance. While Foucault focuses on processes of truth or, more generally, knowledge production, surveillance and their connection to the formation of an intelligible Self, Glissant focuses on processes of recognition and the acceptance of social, cultural and racial differences. He criticizes that Western thought imagines the acceptance of difference through processes of understanding. He argues that "the process of 'understanding' people and ideas" demands their "transparency" [24], and the reduction of complexity. Much like Foucault, Glissant emphasizes that this process of becoming transparent (or in Foucault's terms of confessing) implies a subjugation under a position of power from the onset: acceptance is 'granted' by the knowing Self (the subject or 'I' of a sentence, which has been traditionally and unconditionally assumed to be a white Western[-European] male and its institutions) to the 'Other' (the object, which is supposedly available for knowing), only if the Other's "solidity" [25] can be sufficiently measured, compared, judged, reduced and categorized according to a scale that the Self has set. The Self admits the Other "to existence" through this process of demanding transparency and measuring solidity, thus, creating the Other afresh. "Accepting differences does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale." [26] But even if the Self attempts to understand the Other's difference without creating a hierarchy, it necessarily relates it to the norm that it has previously established or defined. The relationship between the Self and the Other is consolidated and reproduced again, cemented through the norm and the scale.

Therefore, in order to break this cycle, Glissant proposes that "we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction. Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity." [27] In order to adapt Glissant's theories to the field of post-Soviet queerness, his specific context of postcolonial Martinique and focus on racialized oppression have to be recognized, and it cannot be assumed that the post-Soviet space or queerness share or suffer from similar structures. However, Glissant's conceptualization of opacity offers an ethics that promotes the building of relationships to different, non-Caribbean contexts. It does so because Glissant critically challenges the foundations of Western Enlightenment (and its colonial legacy) as such, radically deconstructing identity politics and 'Othering' as a basis of knowledge production and, with it, the 'fabric' of knowledge. In the words of Jeannine Murray-Román, his demand for the right to opacity offers "an alternative to Eurocentric methodologies of acquiring data and demanding complete transparency from its objects of analysis." [28]

As (predominantly) post-Soviet artists and researchers who are working on a project funded by a Western institution, we recognize our position of power and address it critically. We build on Glissant's work on opacity and relate it to the Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's call to refuse research. [29] These scholars criticize social science research from a decolonial perspective, addressing the experiences of native, ghettoized and orientalized communities and "other communities of overstudied Others." [30] Tuck and Yang discuss three axioms of social science research: "(I) the subaltern can speak, but is only invited to speak her/our pain; (II) there are some forms of knowledge that the academy does not deserve; and (III) research may not be the intervention that is needed." [31]

We argue that most of the existing studies on post-Soviet queerness, due to their focus on visibility, reduce queer lives to the analysis of oppression and pain narratives. [32] Moreover, the same research potentially creates a kind of visibility that puts the queer lives in further danger of being surveilled, disciplined, censored or worse. In coherence with the visibility paradigm, many transnational solidarity efforts create discourses which propagate coming out, being out and visible as queer as progressive and livable forms of living, and being closeted or invisible as shameful and not livable. Thereby, international research and other forms of solidarity are often not able to account for or recognize the opaque ways in which queer lives resist homophobic oppression. [33]

We build on the critique of perspectives from the post-socialist [34] and post-Soviet [26] contexts to rethink post-Soviet queerness and queer relationality. While we insist that specific contexts produce specific forms of oppression and resistance, we find critique coming from non-Western spaces generally productively challenging transnational hegemonic discourses that operate under the assumption that North-American or North-Western LGBTIQAP+ identities and identity politics are universal. Many of these works further challenge the idea that political and social representation as LGBTIQAP+, typically in forms of 'queer or gay pride,' including rainbow merchandise and public 'coming out,' is the appropriate political form to reach recognition by the community and main-

stream culture. Implicitly or explicitly, all of these critiques address the problem of visibility and transparency as a precondition for acceptance and social equality.

While we respect that groups use identity politics and choose representation and visibility to create solidarity movements and actions in their aim to create change, we oppose the universalization of visibility, transparency, and identities as necessary to build these alliances and come to any kind of agency. Moreover, given the limited and negative effects of visibility politics within post-Soviet contexts, we argue that there is an urgent need to find and theorize different politics.

Opacity and queer post-Soviet relationships

Taking Tuck and Yang's refusal of research as an invitation to try new methodologies, we turn to Glissant's vocabulary and concepts to move away from social research and its goal of transparency of (sexual and gender) difference. We animate his conceptualization of the relationship between the Self and the Other for our discussion of the norm and (sexual and gendered) difference, and show that the process of making queer ways of living and being visible is already a measurement of these lives against the scale of normativity that exercises violence. The identification of queerness as a sexual and gender difference from the norm always reconfirms the norm's existence in the first place. Moreover, politics that are based on sexual and gender difference are necessarily reductionist and affirm the idea of solidity. They reduce subjects to their (homo)sexuality, gender or any other factor that assumedly constitutes identities and demand these aspects not only to be visible but also permanent, unchangeable and fixed. LGBTIQAP+ activism and academic approaches following the Western visibility paradigm and demanding the right to difference, with the best of intentions, agree to the violent demand of 'being solid' and the reductionist labor to become transparent in order to be accepted by the hegemon.

The demand of 'solidity' is often marked as a requirement to 'come out' within LGBTIQAP+ or feminist communities, frequently without considering the consequences of such calls. Those who are not willing or able to make themselves available (transparent) to the hegemon (or publicly) are, if not excluded by the minority groups, pitied or shamed by the same. Moreover, differences that are not easily reduced and made transparent, such as gender and sexual fluidity, irritate the process of classification and are often barred from acceptance (and access to resources is denied). Moreover, the problematization of multiple and fluid belongings and identifications along the lines of race, ethnicity and class further unsettles the relationship between the Self and the Other, upsets the scale and cannot conform easily to transparency.

We embrace Glissant's concept of "the Other of Thought" [35] as an alternative to a politics of difference and transparency, and in combination with his concept of opacity, as a research focus as well as for our conceptualization of what it means to live and love queerly within the post-Soviet spheres. Rather than 'thinking of the Other' – and thereby making the Other and its difference transparent – "the Other of Thought" means "to see the world from the multiplicity of things." [36] It is a position of "the ontological excess that cannot be contained by the cultural hegemony of the self, and asserts positively the productive possibility of a language not organized around the authority of the sovereign self." [37]

Referring to Anna T. and her thorough study of queer slang through the lens of opacity, we understand queerness as an activist and academic concept which is tightly related to opacity: "Opacity is evident in queer's fluidity, its resistance to clear delineation, its willfulness to become transparent through constancy; this is why queer subjects have used the tactic in their struggle to resist and survive." [38] Queerness, accordingly, is simultaneously 'Relation' – what binds people together – as well as opacity, as/and an ontological excess that cannot be contained with words or signification.

We use Glissant's concept of Relation, which, according to its French meaning, is a verb or an action. It is what weaves together, bonds, conjoins and merges. It is simultaneously "knowing and making[,] aesthetic and ontological." [39] An important aspect of Relation is connected to language as a symbolic domain where separate or broken parts can be connected and translated into each other. In Glissant's theory "Relation is spoken." [40] Since the French verb 'relate' also means 'to narrate' or 'to tell,' "Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge." [41] In a more feminist and materialist sense, we suggest to move away from verbality and language in a narrow sense and move towards an understanding of Relation as a materiality of knowledge, and the relationship between knowledge and ontology. We follow Li Chi-She's reading [42] of Glissant's Relation as ontology that encompasses a connection to not only other people but also the material world around us.

Following this line of thought, we imagine queerness (for our project and regarding the post-Soviet spaces) as an existence that is not transparent and, hence, cannot and should not be limited to the distinct markers of lesbian, or gay desire, or any desire- or gender-based identity as they are understood and conceptualized within Western academic and activist discourses. Most importantly, queerness is a point of relation and recognition that is not necessarily verbalized or visible, but allows for connecting to others and building community.

Building on the works of Jonathan Katz [43], Francesca Stella [44], Dean Anthony Brink [45], Jingshu Zhu [46], Christian Sancto [47] and others, we argue that there are and always have been other forms of truth production, and points for recognition and (self-)legitimation that operate and perhaps thrive beyond the realm of the visible within the West and elsewhere. Their works support Glissant's argument that the opaque, inaccessible or nontransparent can produce human relationships, acceptance and recognition. Like Glissant, they emphasize that opacity (not visibility and transparency) is the foundation of a relationality that allows for the sustaining and distributing of knowledge under conditions of oppression.

Importantly, Glissant argues that art, in his case poetry, is the tool able to create such forms of opaque knowledge that are simultaneously critical as they are facilitating for oppressed forms of knowing and existing. The researchers and artists Zach Blas [48] and the already mentioned T. [49] have taken up Glissant's concept of opacity to convincingly argue that his "clamor for the right to opacity" [50] echoes queer struggles today and that queer communities have developed opaque artistic ways to relate to each other.

Although not referring to Glissant explicitly, Yevgeniy Fiks' study "Pleshka Theory" [51] theorizes historic queer post-Soviet spaces, queer relationality and existence as opaque. Fiks addresses the fact that the evidence of historic Soviet and post-Soviet queer subjectivity dissolved; firstly, due to state oppression, and later, due to the hegemony of Western queer-aesthetics that assigned post-Soviet queerness to "secondariness." [52] Yet, according to Fiks, the alleged ubiquity of homosexuality in Soviet culture does not necessarily mean that its hidden signs can or should be found, deciphered or interpreted. It means, rather, that queer lives have always been part of Soviet history, even if unmarked and unspoken.

We follow Fiks' idea of queer in/visibility and his queer claim to (post-)Soviet everyday culture and places: the absence of any LGBT and queer public representations in the USSR (and in most post-Soviet countries) does not imply that queer cultural forms are marked with specific attributes – it just means that signs and traces of our living experiences remain opaque to the cis/hetero/normative society. Taking up Fiks' queer claim to the Soviet legacy and rethinking it through Glissant's clamor for the right to opacity, we develop 'The Dream Machine' methodology that allows for the recognition of queer lives in the here and now as well as the imagination of "queer horizons" [53] for the future.

The Dream Machine

The Dream Machine is a metaphor as well as an actual kinetic apparatus that we build collectively with our collaborators in post-Soviet locations. Our collaborators are friends and fellow activists who we met through our mutual interests in queer feminist politics. They are part of our mutual and individual communities, of our mutual and individual friend circles, activist groups and academic environments.

The original Dream Machine apparatus was invented by Brion Gysin. [54] It is a do-it-yourself stroboscopic flicker device that is easily built. It consists of a rotating cylinder with specifically shaped cutouts and a light source (usually a lightbulb) inside that produces visual stimuli. By building this device and developing a collaborative protocol, we initiate a creative process that contains sequences of free association, writing, cut up texts, text arrangements, taking photographs and/or filming.

Once the apparatus is built, the participants locate themselves in front of the Dream Machine with their eyes closed, allowing the light to be projected over their faces. The play of light creates a strobe effect behind the eyelids and evokes eidetic cinematic imagery. This process brings about a meditative state between sleep and wakefulness, letting subconscious content surface. It sends our participants on "a voyage of exploration without restrictions." [55]

Our process is inspired by Glissant's concept of "errantry" [56], which he understands as a historically new way of knowing the world, an epistemic position that comes after that of a conqueror, a scientist, and a tourist. Thus, "thinking of errantry" [57] is a poetic mode of

thought, whose dialectics overcomes the dualism of previous attempts to understand alterity, which Glissant labels as "thinking of territory and self" and "thinking of voyage and other" [58], correspondingly.

Being poetic in nature, the 'errant thought' does not imply losing sense or orientation. Betsy Wing writes in her translator's introduction to Glissant's "Poetics of Relation," errantry (French *errance)* "deflects the negative associations between errer (to wander) and erreur (error). Directed by Relation, errantry follows neither an arrow-like trajectory nor one that is circular and repetitive, nor is it mere wandering – idle roaming. Wandering, one might become lost, but in errantry one knows at every moment where one is – at every moment in relation to the other." [59]

A 'thinking of errantry' makes possible new identities that, according to Glissant, will come after nations: "We will agree that this thinking of errantry, this errant thought, silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us." [60]

Grasping queer existence through errantry allows our participants to rethink the binary of presence and absence, of past and future. It allows them to approach their lives and experiences as queer, yet, without relating them to the North/Western ideas of what counts as a queer life. This also implies 'seeing' beyond homo- and transphobic oppression and the reality of minoritized lives. It opens a "queer horizon," to quote Muñoz [61], to imagine the unimaginable. The results of this creative process reflect queer experiences, yet, they do not expose the authors or creators and their communities. They emerge in a space and will be archived in an online depository (a multilingual homepage publicly accessible) both of which we call 'The Magic Closet.'

Coming to a preliminary conclusion: The Magic Closet

In order to avoid reproducing the violence of research and transparency, we use participatory community-oriented art research called The Dream Machine that does not aim at making the marginalized visible. Not reproducing pain narratives about post-Soviet/-socialist queers, we invite local community members to focus on being in a safe(r) space, building (queer) connections to each other and imagining better futures together. Instead of extracting the knowledge about 'exotic' communities and delivering it to the Western academia, we capture the traces of queer lives that will neither expose nor endanger them nor make them transparent to Western research. We plan our workshops together with local community members, creating safe(r) spaces, sharing artistic and research skills and tools to introduce other forms of intervention than research.

The Magic Closet is a sphere of artistic and cultural production where queer lives are sustained, reproduced and facilitated. It is the actual place that we mutually create when we come together with our collaborators to build and use the Dream Machine. Beyond that, it is an archive that holds the evidence of post-Soviet queer lives. The Magic Closet moves away from the visibility paradigm and the focus on identity politics; it is vigilant regarding the hegemonic dominance and violence of Western LGBTIQAP+ identity politics.

The Magic Closet plays with the idea and concept of the gay closet, and the binary of being closeted and coming out. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued that the closet is "the defining structure for gay oppression" [62], a figure of shame and other bad feelings. Artists and researchers, such as T. or Nicholas De Villiers, however, have offered "a reparative reading" of the closet, "by connecting it additionally (not instead) to comfort, safety, and belonging." [63] Using autoethnography to support her claim, T. writes: "[t]he closet for me has been a shelter, a refuge, a home, a friend. It has been my happy place for decades." [64]

We follow T. and others to allow for an embracing of the closet as a place of resistance against the oppression of homo- and transphobia as well as the violence of normative Western or any other knowledge production. It is a place that "allows for a re-thinking of dichotomies and a more fluid and adjustable understanding of subjectivities." [65]

The Magic Closet renders those who roam it opaque, but this does not mean that they hide there. Celia Britton argues regarding the context of the colonization of the Caribbean that "opacity cannot mean simply hiding, because there is – culturally as well as literally – nowhere to hide" [66], and this equally describes the situation of queer lives under conditions of heteronormativity and homo- and transphobic oppression quite well. "Opacity therefore has to be produced as an unintelligible presence from within the visible presence of the colonized" [67] or the queer. Most importantly, the Magic Closet is not only a shelter where people can breathe. It is a place where they connect to others. It is a place for creativity and fantasy. It is a place of care for oneself and for others, for community building and for catching glimpses of queer horizons.

Notes:

[1] The methodology and concepts were developed within the project "The Magic Closet and the Dream Machine. Post-Soviet Queerness, Archiving, and the Art of Resistance" (AR 567), funded by the Austrian Science Fund (2020–2023), https://magic-closet.univie.ac.at/.

[2] We are aware that not all academic research about queer issues in post-Soviet spaces is done in solidarity or alliance with queer lives in the regions. In our project, however, we address this scholarly knowledge produced in solidarity explicitly.

[3] Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor 2010 [1997], here p. 190.

[4] Eve Tuck/K. Wayne Yang, R-Words: Refusing Research, in: Django Paris/Maisha T. Winn (eds.), Humanizing Research. Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities, Thousand Oaks 2014, ch. 12.

[5] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, Berkeley 1990.

[6] KX online, Квир или не квир – онлайн-дискуссия (Queer or Not/to Queer or Not to Queer – an Online Discussion), June 20, 2020, https://youtu.be/mXl_P7FRM_Q (accessed May 14, 2022).

[7] Валерий Созаев, От редактора: возможен ли «квир» по-русски? In: Возможен ли «квир» по-русски? ЛГБТК исследования. Междисциплинарный сборник, Санкт Петербуг 2010, http://leonatus.ucoz.ru/books/queer.pdf (accessed May 14, 2022).

[8] Квір is used in Ukraine by both LGBTIQAP+ non-profit organizations and grassroots activists. The anarcho-feminist group Svobodna, for example, introduced this term in 2008 as a "contemporary antonym to heteronormativity" in Katharina Wiedlack / Olenka Dmytryk/Syaivo, Fucking Solidarity. Queering Concepts on/from a Post-Soviet Perspective, in: Feminist Critique 5 (2022), pp. 10–26. Around 2013, small groups of queer-anarcha feminists in St Petersburg and Moscow started using the term for their street actions: see Masha Neufeld / Katharina Wiedlack, Lynchpin for Value Negotiation. Lesbians, Gays and Transgender between Russia and 'the West', in: Bee Scherer (ed.), Queering Paradigms VI. Interventions, Ethics and Glocalities, Peter Lang 2016, pp. 173–194, here p. 189. Starting from 2016, the term queer in combination with feminist was used by Novosibirsk activists to describe their collective and spaces. In Kyrgyzstan, the term queer and queer theory were popularized by the School of Theory and Activism Bishkek (STAB) and especially in their 2013 publication "Queer Communism Manifesto"; see Mohira Suyarkulova, Translating 'Queer' into (Kyrgyzstani) Russian, E-International Relations, September 18, 2019, https://www.e-ir.info/2019/08/18/translating-queer-into-kyrgyzstani-russian/ (accessed May 14, 2022). In Lithuania, the term queer is frequently used in reference to LGBTIQAP+ communities, identities and as an approach critical to identities in art and culture spaces, such as CAC, From Dusk till Dawn. 20 Years of LGBT Freedom in Lithuania. Contemporary Art Center, 2013, https://cac.lt/en/exhibition/from-dusk-till-dawn-20-years-of-lgbt-freedom-in-lithuania/ (accessed July 11, 2022) and SAPFO Fest Lithuania, Empowering and Connecting Queer Community, 2015, https://www.bleedinglove.eu/sapfo-fest-lithuania-empowering-and-connecting-queer-community/ (accessed August 10, 2020). Moreover, a growing corpus of academic works has been produced within the Russian-speaking academia by authors of different nationalities, for example, Ольга Плахотник, Я экспериментирую с квир-педагогикой на своих занятиях, Гендерный маршрут, October 31, 2013, http://gender-route.org/articles/inter/ol_ga_plahotnik_ya_e_ksperimentiruyu_s_kvir-pedagogikoj_na_svoih_zanyatiyah/ (accessed July 11, 2022); Olga Plakhotnik, Queer Pedagogy and Post-Soviet Education. Where is The Exit From Epistemological and Political Deadlock, in: Aleksander Kondakov (ed.), At the Crossroads. Methodology, Theory and Practice of LGBT and Queer Studies, Center for Independent Sociological Research, SPb 2014, pp. 359–378; Therese Garstenauer, Gender and Queer Research in Russia, in: Sociology of Power 30 (2018) 1, pp. 160–174; Анна Номеровская, Проблема нормативности в дискурсе квир-теории. Исторические, философские, политические и юридические науки, культурология и искусствоведение, Вопросы теории и практики 11–2 (2014) 49; Любовь Аладьева, Этика квир-сообщества. В: Анатолий Легчилин/Вероника Сайганова (ред.), Человек. Культура. Общество: тезисы докладов XIII научной конференции студентов, магистрантов и аспирантов факультета философии и социцальных наук БГУ, Минск 2016; Алла Митрофанова, Квир-феминизм как конструирование медиальных миров. На перепутье, 2014, p. 335, in the Lithuanian and Estonian language, as well as other post-Soviet languages.

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[34] Ivana Pražić, Belgrade Pride Parade 2010: Queer Politics in Serbia, in: Sushila Mesquita/Maria Katharina Wiedlack/Katrin Lasthofer (eds.), Import – Export – Transport: Queer Theory, Queer Critique, and Activism in Motion, Vienna 2012, pp. 97–114; Robert Kulpa/Joanna Mizielińska/Agata Stasińska, (Un) translatable Queer?, or What Is Lost and Can Be Found in Translation, in: Mesquita/Wiedlack/Lasthofer, Import – Export, pp. 115–146.

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